

Do Secularists Own Reason?

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“We are moving towards a dictatorship of relativism, which does not recognize anything as definitive and has as its highest value one’s own ego and one’s own desires,” said Joseph Ratzinger at a mass shortly before his election to the papacy. His description of civilization’s crisis still resonates. Almost two years into his pontificate, Benedict XVI continues to battle an aggressive secularist ideology which professes great tolerance even as it banishes conscience and religion from public life. Whether fining doctrinal Christians in Canada and Europe for violating “hate speech” codes, imposing immoral regulations upon Catholic adoption agencies in America and England, or excluding the Vatican from moral questions in Italian politics, secularists indeed operate like dictators.

“Let us strangle the last king with the guts of the last priest,” said 18th century French philosopher Denis Diderot. The children of the Enlightenment haven’t lost this brutal spirit, and while they can’t strangle popes physically they do try and strangle them politically. Their first move, for example, in Italy’s controversy over extending quasi-marital status to homosexual couples was to forbid any meaningful Church presence in the debate. “The Church has a right to speak, to say what it wants; but parliament and the government should ignore the religious position on this issue,” declared Franco Grillini, a member of the Italian parliament, in a typical statement heard throughout the controversy.

Buried in such statements is an ideological hubris that is breathtaking. Exactly what superior wisdom entitles secularists to monopolize public life? Do they own reason? Is their account of reality so infallible that they alone should dictate the direction of society?

No, upon close examination, the enlightened conceits of secularists fall apart. Indeed, what makes their monopolizing claims so perverse is that they do not rest upon reason at all. Yes, secularists wield the word “reason,” but they deny its reality and resort to raw power and hectoring rhetoric in the place of it.

Unable to answer the Church’s arguments, which do rest upon careful philosophical demonstrations, secularists label those arguments “religious” in the hope that no one will engage them. In this sophistical game, the secularists’ use of the word “religious” is intended to conjure up an image of irrationality, as if to say that any “religious position” is nothing more than a mindless demand from fantasists. Yet

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the crude picture they paint stares back at them: their positions, not “religious” ones, reflect egotistical caprice rather than sound philosophy.

The human ego, as Pope Benedict XVI trenchantly argues, has become the measure of morality and culture, displacing God as the source of meaning. And into the void left by the absence of God from public life enter heavy-handed secularists who construct a de facto religion of their own, one which has all (and more) of the dogmatism of traditional religion without any of its sense or authority. Unlike true religion, the religion of secularism has no limits, for there is no power above it, and thus inevitably devolves into an ideology of force.

The Church, as an institution embedded in reality, has not only the right

but the duty to push back against the dictatorship of relativism, both to protect civilization in this life and save souls for the next. One of the early achievements of this pontificate is a bolder Church presence in critical public debates—a sign of which was that not long after Pope Benedict’s election the bishops of Italy inspired by his direction successfully defeated a 2005 pro-cloning referendum. Arrogant Italian politicians, who used to dismiss the post-Vatican II Church as feckless, now openly worry about the Church’s power to influence debates. Good. Even Great Britain’s bishops, normally circumspect to the point of cowardice, are showing some fight on the question of same-sex adoption as the dictatorship of relativism in that country moves to criminalize Catholic social agencies which remain true to Church teaching.

Western history is moving out along the lines Pope Benedict XVI suggested in his pre-conclave sermon, revolving around a struggle between an increasingly despotic man-centered culture and the God-centered one from which the West came. As the secular West girds itself against encroaching dictatorships from the Muslim world, it blindly sustains a dictatorship of its own; it worries about losing “freedom” to the terrorists, then robs God-given liberty from Westerners in the name of its own skewed ideology.

If the dictatorship of relativism succeeds—if all who enter the public square are eventually forced to submit to secularism’s inversion of morality—Western culture will have vanished long before the arrival of Islamic terrorists. The Church is nothing less than the West’s last hope—the only authority capable of curing, in Pope Benedict’s formulation, its self-devouring “reason” without faith while serving as a bulwark against its enemies’ faith without reason. ■ —George Neumayr