Reclaiming America’s Religious—and Christian—Culture
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This was one of SCSS president and Franciscan University of Steubenville professor Stephen M. Krason’s “Neither Left Nor Right, but Catholic” columns that appeared initially in Crisismagazine.com on February 3, 2013. It discusses the ongoing assault by secularist groups to cleanse American public life of any vestiges of religion. This radical separationism, which had its roots in the post-Civil War period and essentially was embraced by the U.S. Supreme Court in its long line of establishment clause decisions, is completely contrary to the thinking of the Founding Fathers and the predominant culture of earlier America. Krason calls for a renewed effort, at different levels, to reclaim America’s historically religious and Christian culture.

Often today, we hear of Christians and other religious people engaged in struggles in the U.S. just to be able to project expressions of their faith into the public domain. Thus, for years now we have witnessed secularists of various stripes—those with a particular animosity toward anything religious—conduct a veritable assault on Christmas. The reports from the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights provide a yearly documentary history of this. Unbelievers seem unsatisfied to be hopeless and joyless on their own but insist on making as many others as possible share in their misery.

Aggressive secularists, spearheaded today by such groups as the Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF)—the scuttlebutt is that the ACLU lets them handle the cases even they find too hot to handle—use a combination of legal threats and action to drive from the public domain any vestige, even slightly symbolic, of religion. Their aim, of course, is to forge not just a secular state but as much as possible a secular culture surrounding it, as well. If local governments—increasingly the battleground for these matters—do not just cave in to their threats to avoid the high costs of constitutional litigation, they try to accommodate by allowing all religious—and irreligious—perspectives to be presented. So, when a Christian group wants to put up a religious symbol on public property, atheists are allowed to put up a billboard criticizing religion or extolling “reason” (it’s interesting that those claiming to extol reason never mention that hu-
man reason unaided by Revelation proves, with certitude, the existence of God). In a case now going before the Supreme Court, *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, the town council had an “inclusive” policy of who could lead prayers at the start of their meetings, so that even Wiccans and atheists—praying, I guess, to some great nothingness—took part. Still, that was not enough for some secularists, who sued. [Ed. note: In 2014, the Supreme Court decided this case, holding that the town’s practice of beginning their meetings with prayers was constitutional.]

The momentum to push religion out of the public arena began, of course, with the line of Supreme Court establishment clause decisions beginning almost seventy years ago. As Donald L. Drakeman and others have written, the Court’s “new direction” then was partly driven by suspicion of the Catholic Church. The Court also opened itself to the views of secular post-World War II liberal intellectuals, whose separationist reinterpretation of the establishment clause had its roots in the 1870s. The Court’s separationist jurisprudence has forced government to be neutral not just among different religious beliefs, but between belief and unbelief (that’s why Wiccans and atheists get “equal access” with Christians to leading prayers). The fact that the Court also in 1968 carved out a special exception for the establishment clause from the normal legal requirement of having to show that a legal harm was sustained before one can even get a case into court has opened the door to the legal pressure tactics of outfits such as the FFRF. In other words, any taxpayer could sue. Anyone whose feelings have somehow been hurt by the most innocuous public accommodation of religion can line up a willing advocacy group and begin a constitutional case.

The entire idea of neutrality between belief and unbelief is a falsehood. If government gives no avowed attention to religion, it is saying that it’s not important. If it lets Wiccans lead prayers just like Christians, it’s saying that witchcraft is on the same level as Christianity. This is an embracing of an official stance of utter religious indifferentism. To say that religion is irrelevant to the condition of a state or culture is adoption of an all but official religion of secularism. As the late, great Catholic constitutional lawyer William Bentley Ball once caustically said about this, “A secularist establishment, anyone?”

This perspective cannot be farther from that of America’s Founding Fathers, as a small sampling of their statements makes apparent. In his famous Farewell Address, George Washington said that “[o]f all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.” He referred to God as the “Great Author of every public and private good.” John Adams wrote that, “Our Constitution
was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” At the Constitutional Convention of 1787 Benjamin Franklin—a supposed deist—said that, “God governs in the affairs of men…without his concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the Builders of Babel.” Another seeming deist, Thomas Jefferson, said, “No nation has ever yet existed or been governed without religion. Nor can be.” James Madison (the “Father of the Constitution”) affirmed, “Religion is the basis and Foundation of Government.”

Nor was the religious heritage of America some vague, indefinite notion, or anything anyone wanted to turn it into. It was Christian. Tocqueville observed, “Christianity has kept a strong hold over the minds of Americans,” which in spite of a “multitude of sects” meant “the same morality.” As my good friend, the late historian Donald J. D’Elia, wrote, “[t]he social way of life” in eighteenth-century America was “largely based on the Christian faith.” The great twentieth-century scholar Russell Kirk said, the “American faith” was “a biblical Christianity, securely rooted in popular conviction.” In short, while America never had a Christian state—and was never anything like a theocracy—it was clearly a Christian culture, with distinctly Christian morality and mores, and had a notion of government inspired by a Christian understanding of man.

Reclaiming America’s religious and Christian culture is no quick or easy task. We, of course, do not know if—in the final analysis—it is possible. It has taken almost a century and a half to get from the first serious push for separationism until the current effort to rinse American public life clean of religion. What we do know is that it is not impossible. This is a time for political, legal, and cultural counterattack—which has to take place on many fronts. Aggressive legal efforts—not just to lead the defense of religious liberty at a time when it is coming under unprecedented attack, but also to oppose and try to reverse the continued twisting of the establishment clause—are essential. In this sense, organizations like the Alliance Defending Freedom, are “spot-on.” There is a need to aggressively counter the secularists’ every legal move. The overall constitutional objective, however, must be to bury the Court’s separationist jurisprudence, which has long been on life-support (with obvious contradictions and a bevy of judicial zigs and zags to try to keep it intact). The target should be, substantively, the reversal of the neutrality-between-belief-and-unbelief doctrine and, procedurally, changing the rule allowing mere taxpayer suits. There is no question about protecting the citizen rights of unbelievers, Wiccans, or anyone with offbeat religious beliefs, but they have no right—under the American constitutional tradition or certainly in
the natural law tradition behind it—to expect their beliefs to be given the same official respect as Christianity or other traditional religions.

The political counterattack has begun in some local communities, with officials and citizens standing up to the veiled threats of the FFRF and refusing to remove religious symbols. Such resolve must expand. More and persistent vocal opposition in newspaper letter columns and online forums, citizen presence at public meetings, and legal public demonstrations against further attempts at secularizing our communities are needed.

The opportunities for cultural counterattack are almost innumerable: making a point to say “God bless you” and “Merry Christmas” at the store check-out counter, putting religious symbols in a very visible place on one’s lawn, commending or urging local businesses to display religious symbols or sayings, church and religious organizations playing an increasingly visible role in community activities with a strong emphasis on their distinct character as they do it, organizing talks and study groups on the religious tradition of early America and the Founders’ thinking on religion, and so on and on.

Does anyone believe that Islamic countries are going to surrender their Islamic cultural character? So, why don’t we have a right to reclaim the Christian character of ours?