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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

GOD AND THE STATE

BY

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GOD AND THE STATE.

All governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed.

IN this country it is admitted that the power to govern resides in the people themselves; that they are the only rightful source of authority. For many centuries before the formation of our government, before the promulgation of the Declaration of Independence, the people had but little voice in the affairs of nations. The source of authority was not in this world; kings were not crowned by their subjects, and the sceptre was not held by the consent of the governed. The king sat on his throne by the will of God, and for that reason was not accountable to the people for the exercise of his power. He commanded, and the people obeyed. He was lord of their bodies, and his partner, the priest, was lord of their souls. The government of earth was patterned after the kingdom on high. God was a supreme autocrat in heaven, whose will was law, and the king was a supreme autocrat on earth, whose will was law. The God in heaven had inferior beings to do his will, and the king on earth had certain favorites and officers to do his. These officers were accountable to him, and he was responsible to God.

The feudal system was supposed to be in accordance with the divine plan. The people were not governed by intelligence, but by threats and promises, by rewards and punishments. No effort was made to enlighten the common people; no one thought of educating a peasant—of developing the mind of a

laborer. The people were created to support thrones and altars. Their destiny was to toil and obey—to work and want. They were to be satisfied with huts and hovels, with ignorance and rags, and their children must expect no more. In the presence of the king they fell upon their knees, and before the priest they grovelled in the very dust. The poor peasant divided his earnings with the state, because he imagined it protected his body; he divided his crust with the church, believing it protected his soul. He was the prey of throne and altar—one deformed his body, the other his mind—and these two vultures fed upon his toil. He was taught by the king to hate the people of other nations, and by the priest to despise the believers in all other religions. He was made the enemy of all people except his own. He had no sympathy with the peasants of other lands enslaved and plundered like himself. He was kept in ignorance, because education is the enemy of superstition, and because education is the foe of that egotism often mistaken for patriotism.

The intelligent and good man holds in his affections the good and true of every land—the boundaries of countries are not the limitations of his sympathies. Caring nothing for race, or color, he loves those who speak other languages and worship other gods. Between him and those that suffer, there is no impassable gulf. He salutes the world, and extends the hand of friendship to the human race. He does not bow before a provincial and patriotic God—one who protects his tribe or nation, and abhors the rest of mankind.

Through all the ages of superstition, each nation has insisted that it was the peculiar care of the true God, and that it alone had the true religion—that the gods of other nations were false and fraudulent, and that other religions were wicked, ignorant, and absurd. In this way the seeds of hatred have been sown, and in this way have been kindled the flames of war. Men have had no sympathy with those of a different complexion, with those that knelt at other altars and expressed their thoughts in other words—and even a difference in garments placed them beyond the sympathy of others.

Every peculiarity was the food of prejudice and the excuse for hatred.

The boundaries of nations were at last crossed by commerce, People became somewhat acquainted, and they found that the virtues and vices were quite evenly distributed. At last subjects became somewhat acquainted with kings—peasants had the pleasure of gazing at princes, and it was dimly perceived that the differences were mostly in rags and names.

In 1776 our fathers endeavored to retire the gods from politics. They declared that "all governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed." This was a contradiction of the then political ideas of the world ; it was, as many believed, an act of pure blasphemy—a renunciation of the deity. It was in fact, a declaration of the independence of the earth. It was a notice to all churches and priests that thereafter mankind would govern and protect themselves. Politically it tore down every altar and denied the authority of every "sacred book," and appealed from the providence of God to the Providence of Man.

Those who promulgated the Declaration adopted a Constitution for the great Republic.

What was the office or purpose of that Constitution ?

Admitting that all power came from the people, it was necessary, first, that certain means be adopted for the purpose of ascertaining the will of the people ; and second, it was proper and convenient to designate certain departments that should exercise certain powers of the government. There must be the legislative, the judicial, and the executive department. Those who make laws should not execute them. Those who execute laws should not have the power of absolutely determining their meaning or their constitutionality. For these reasons, among others, a constitution was adopted.

The constitution also contained a declaration of rights. It marked out the limitations of discretion, so that in the excitement of passion men shall not go beyond the point designated in the calm moment of reason.

When man is unprejudiced, and his passions subject to reason, it is well he should define the limits of power, so that the waves driven by the storm of passion shall not overbear the shore.

A constitution is for the government of man in this world. It is the chain the people put upon their servants as upon themselves. It defines the limit of power and the limit of obedience.

It follows, then, that nothing should be in a constitution that cannot be enforced by the power of the state—that is, by the army and navy. Behind every provision of the constitution should stand the force of the nation. Every sword, every bayonet, every cannon should be there.

Suppose, then, that we amend the constitution and acknowledge the existence and supremacy of God—what becomes of the supremacy of the people, and how is this amendment to be enforced? A constitution does not enforce itself. It must be carried out by appropriate legislation. Will it be a crime to deny the existence of this Constitutional God? Can the offender be proceeded against in the criminal courts? Can his lips be closed by the power of the state? Would not this be the inauguration of religious persecution?

And if there is to be an acknowledgment of God in the Constitution, the question naturally arises as to which God is to have this honor. Shall we select the God of the Catholics—he who has established an infallible church presided over by an infallible pope, and who is delighted with certain ceremonies and placated by prayers uttered in exceedingly common Latin? Is it the God of the Presbyterian, with the Five Points of Calvinism, who is ingenious enough to harmonise necessity and responsibility, and who in some way justifies himself for damning most of his own children? Is it the God of the Puritan, the enemy of joy—of the Baptist, who is great enough to govern the universe, and small enough to allow the destiny of a soul to depend on whether the body it inhabited was immersed or sprinkled?

What God is it proposed to put in the Constitution ? Is it the God of the Old Testament, who was a believer in slavery and who justified polygamy ? If slavery was right then, it is right now ; and if Jehovah was right then, the Mormons are right now. Are we to have the God who issued a commandment against all art—who was the enemy of investigation and of free speech ? Is it the God who commanded the husband to stone his wife to death because she differed with him on the subject of religion ? Are we to have a God who will re-enact the Mosaic code and punish hundreds of offences with death ? What court, what tribunal of last resort, is to define this God, and who is to make known his will ? In his presence laws passed by men will be of no value. The decisions of courts will be as nothing. But who is to make known the will of this supreme God ? Will there be a supreme tribunal composed of priests ?

Of course all persons elected to office will either swear or affirm to support the Constitution. Men who do not believe in this God, cannot so swear or affirm. Such men will not be allowed to hold any office of trust or honor. A God in the Constitution will not interfere with the oaths or affirmations of hypocrites. Such a provision will only exclude honest and conscientious believers. Intelligent people know that no one knows whether there is a God or not. The existence of such a being is merely a matter of opinion. Men who believe in the liberty of man, who are willing to die for the honor of their country, will be excluded from taking any part in the administration of its affairs. Such a provision would place the country under the feet of priests.

To recognise a deity in the organic law of our country would be the destruction of religious liberty. The God in the Constitution would have to be protected. There would be laws against blasphemy, laws against the publication of honest thoughts, laws against carrying books and papers in the mails, in which this constitutional God should be attacked. Our land would be filled with theological spies, with religious eavesdroppers, and all the snakes and reptiles of the

lowest natures, in this sunshine of religious authority, would uncoil and crawl.

It is proposed to acknowledge a God who is the lawful and rightful governor of nations—the one who ordained the powers that be. If this God is really the governor of nations, it is not necessary to acknowledge him in the Constitution. This would not add to his power. If he governs all nations now, he has always controlled the affairs of men. Having this control, why did he not see to it that he was recognised in the Constitution of the United States? If he had the supreme authority and neglected to put himself in the Constitution, is not this, at least, *prima facie* evidence that he did not desire to be there?

For one, I am not in favor of the God who has “ordained the powers that be.” What have we to say of Russia—of Siberia? What can we say of the persecuted and enslaved? What of the kings and nobles who live on the stolen labors of others? What of the priest and cardinal and pope, who wrest even from the hand of poverty the single coin thrice earned?

Is it possible to flatter the Infinite with a constitutional amendment? The “Confederate States” acknowledged God in their constitution, and yet they were overwhelmed by a people in whose organic law no reference to God is made. All the kings of the earth acknowledge the existence of God, and God is their ally; and this belief in God is used as a means to enslave and rob, to govern and degrade the people whom they call their subjects.

The government of the United States is secular. It derives its power from the consent of man. It is a government with which God has nothing whatever to do—and all forms and customs, inconsistent with the fundamental fact that the people are the source of authority, should be abandoned. In this country there should be no oaths—no man should be sworn to tell the truth, and in no court should there be any appeal to any supreme being. A rascal by taking the oath appears to go in partnership with God, and ignorant jurors credit the firm instead of the man. A witness should tell his story, and if he speaks falsely should

be considered as guilty of perjury. Governors and Presidents should not issue religious proclamations. They should not call upon the people to thank God. It is no part of their official duty. It is outside of and beyond the horizon of their authority. There is nothing in the Constitution of the United States to justify this religious impertinence.

For many years priests have attempted to give to our government a religious form. Zealots have succeeded in putting the legend upon our money: "In God we Trust;" and we have chaplains in the army and navy, and legislative proceedings are usually opened with prayer.

All this is contrary to the genius of the Republic, contrary to the Declaration of Independence, and contrary really to the Constitution of the United States. We have taken the ground that the people can govern themselves without the assistance of any supernatural power. We have taken the position that the people are the real and only rightful source of authority. We have solemnly declared that the people must determine what is politically right and what is wrong and that their legally expressed will is the supreme law. This leaves no room for national superstition—no room for patriotic gods or supernatural beings—and this does away with the necessity for political prayers.

The government of God has been tried. It was tried in Palestine several thousand years ago, and the God of the Jews was a monster of cruelty and ignorance, and the people governed by this God lost their nationality. Theocracy was tried through the Middle Ages. God was the governor—the Pope was his agent, and every priest and bishop and cardinal was armed with credentials from the most high—and the result was that the noblest and best were in prisons, the greatest and grandest perished at the stake. The result was that vices were crowned with honor, and virtues whipped naked through the streets. The result was that hypocrisy swayed the sceptre of authority, while honesty languished in the dungeons of the Inquisition.

The government of God was tried in Geneva when John Calvin was his representative; and under this government of God the flames climbed around the limbs and blinded the eyes of Michael Servetus, because he dared to express an honest thought. This government of God was tried in Scotland, and the seeds of theological hatred were sown that bore, through hundreds of years, the fruit of massacre and assassination. This government of God was established in New England, and the result was that Quakers were hanged or burnt—the laws of Moses re-enacted and the “witch was not suffered to live.” The result was that investigation was a crime, and the expression of an honest thought a capital offence. This government of God was established in Spain, and the Jews were expelled, the Moors were driven out, Moriscoes were exterminated, and nothing left but the ignorant and bankrupt worshippers of this monster. This government of God was tried in the United States, when slavery was regarded as a divine institution, when men and women were regarded as criminals because they sought for liberty by flight, and when others were regarded as criminals because they gave them food and shelter. The pulpit of that day defended the buying and selling of women and babes, and the mouths of slave traders were filled with passages of scripture defending and upholding the traffic in human flesh.

We have entered upon a new epoch. This is the century of man. Every effort to really better the condition of mankind has been opposed by the worshippers of some God. The church in all ages and among all peoples has been the consistent enemy of the human race. Everywhere and at all times, it has opposed the liberty of thought and expression. It has been the sworn enemy of investigation and of intellectual development. It has denied the existence of facts the tendency of which was to undermine its power. It has always been carrying fagots to the feet of Philosophy. It has erected the gallows for Genius. It has built the dungeon for thinkers. And to-day the orthodox church is as much opposed as it ever was, to the mental freedom of the human race.

Of course there is a distinction made between churches and individual members. There have been millions of Christians who have been believers in liberty and the freedom of expression—millions who have fought for the rights of man—but churches as organisations have been on the other side. It is true that churches have fought churches—the Protestants battled with the Catholics for what they were pleased to call the freedom of conscience; and it is also true that the moment these Protestants obtained the civil power, they denied this freedom of conscience to others.

Let me show you the difference between the theological and the secular spirit. Nearly three hundred years ago, one of the noblest of the human race, Giordano Bruno, was burnt at Rome by the Catholic church—that is to say by the “Triumphant Beast.” This man had committed certain crimes—he had publicly stated that there were other worlds than this—other constellations than ours. He had ventured the supposition that other planets might be peopled. More than this, and worse than this, he had asserted the heliocentric theory—that the earth made its annual journey about the sun. He had also given it as his opinion that matter is eternal. For these crimes he was found unworthy to live, and about his body were piled the fagots of the Catholic church. This man, this genius, this pioneer of the science of the nineteenth century, perished as serenely as the sun sets. The Infidels of to-day find excuses for his murderers. They take into consideration the ignorance and brutality of the times. They remember then the world was governed by a God who was then the source of all authority. This is the charity of Infidelity—of philosophy. But the church of to-day is so heartless, is still so cold and cruel, that it can find no excuse for the murdered.

This is the difference between Theocracy and Democracy—between God and man.

If God is allowed in the Constitution, man must abdicate. There is no room for both. If the people of the great republic become superstitious enough and

ignorant enough to put God in the Constitution of the United States, the experiment of self-government will have failed, and the great and splendid declaration that "all governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed" will have been denied, and in its place will be found this: All power comes from God; priests are his agents, and the people are their slaves.

Religion is an individual matter, and each soul should be left entirely free to form its own opinions and to judge of its accountability to a supposed supreme being. With religion, government has nothing whatever to do. Government is founded upon force, and force should never interfere with the religious opinions of men. Laws should define the rights of men and their duties toward each other, and these laws should be for the benefit of man in this world.

A nation can neither be Christian nor Infidel—a nation is incapable of having opinions upon these subjects. If a nation is Christian, will all the citizens go to heaven? If it is not, will they all be damned? Of course it is admitted that the majority of citizens composing a nation may believe or disbelieve, and they may call the nation what they please. A nation is a corporation. To repeat a familiar saying "it has no soul." There can be no such thing as a Christian Corporation. Several Christians may form a corporation, but it can hardly be said that the corporation thus formed was included in the atonement. For instance: seven Christians form a corporation—that is to say, there are seven natural persons and one artificial—can it be said that there are eight souls to be saved?

No human being has brain enough, or knowledge enough, or experience enough, to say whether there is, or is not, a God. Into this darkness science has not yet carried its torch. No human being has gone beyond the horizon of the natural. As to the existence of the supernatural, one man knows precisely as much, and exactly as little as another. Upon this question, chimpanzees, and cardinals, apes and popes, are upon exact equality. The smallest insect discernible only

by the most powerful microscope, is as familiar with this subject as the greatest genius that has been produced by the human race.

Governments and laws are for the preservation of rights and the regulation of conduct. One man should not be allowed to interfere with the liberty of another. In the metaphysical world there should be no interference whatever. The same is true in the world of art. Laws cannot regulate what is, or what is not, music—what is or what is not beautiful—and constitutions cannot definitely settle and determine the perfection of statues, the value of paintings, or the glory and subtlety of thought. In spite of laws and constitutions the brain will think. In every direction consistent with the well-being and peace of society, there should be freedom. No man should be compelled to adopt the theology of another; neither should a minority however small, be forced to acquiesce in the opinions of a majority, however large.

If there be an infinite being, he does not need our help—we need not waste our energies in his defence. It is enough for us to give to every other human being the liberty we claim for ourselves. There may or may not be a supreme ruler of the universe—but we are certain that man exists, and we believe that freedom is the condition of progress, that it is the sunshine of the mental and moral world, and that without it man will go back to the den of savagery and will become the fit associate of wild and ferocious beasts.

We have tried the government of priests, and we know that such governments are without mercy. In the administration of theocracy, all the instruments of torture have been invented. If any man wishes to have God recognised in the Constitution of our country, let him read the history of the Inquisition, and let him remember that hundreds of millions of men, women, and children have been sacrificed to placate the wrath or win the approbation of this God.

There has been in our country a divorce of Church and State. This follows as a natural sequence of the declaration that "governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed." The priest was no

longer a necessity. His presence was a contradiction of the principle on which the Republic was founded. He represented, not the authority of the people, but of some "power from on high," and to recognise this other power was inconsistent with free government. The founders of the Republic at that time parted company with the priests, and said to them: "You may turn your attention to the other world—we will attend to the affairs of this." Equal liberty was given to all. But the ultra theologian is not satisfied with this; he wishes to destroy the liberty of the people; he wishes a recognition of his God as the source of authority, to the end that the Church may become the supreme power.

But the sun will not be turned backward. The people of the United States are intelligent. They no longer believe implicitly in supernatural religion. They are losing confidence in the miracles and marvels of the Dark Ages. They know the value of the free school. They appreciate the benefits of science. They are believers in education, in the free play of thought, and there is a suspicion that the priest, the theologian, is destined to take his place with the necromancer, the astrologer, the worker of magic, and the professor of the black art.

We have already compared the benefits of theology and Science. When the theologian governed the world, it was covered with huts and hovels for the many, palaces and cathedrals for the few. To nearly all the children of men reading and writing were unknown arts. The poor were clad in rags and skins—they devoured crusts and gnawed bones. The day of Science dawned, and the luxuries of a century ago are the necessities of to-day. Men in the middle ranks of life have more of the conveniences and elegancies than the princes and kings of the theological times. But above and over all of this, is the development of the mind. There is more of value in the brain of an average man of to-day—of a master-mechanic, of a chemist, of a naturalist, of an inventor, than there was in the brain of the world four hundred years ago.

These blessings did not fall from the skies. These benefits did not crop from the outstretched hands of priests. They were not found in cathedrals or behind altars—neither were they searched for with holy candles. They were not discovered by the closed eyes of prayer, nor did they come in answer to superstitious supplication. They are the children of freedom, the gifts of reason, observation and experience—and for them all man is indebted to man.

Let us hold fast to the sublime declaration of Lincoln: Let us insist that this, the Republic, is “a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

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