

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

Mark L. Melcher
Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup
Senior Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

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THEY SAID IT

“God is dead.” Nietzsche.

“Nietzsche is dead.” God

-- Graffiti.

ALABAMA AND THE TEN COMMANDMENTS. I know that it is no longer in the news, but I have wanted to write about the controversy over the Ten Commandments monument in Alabama ever since I first read about it. So, in keeping with the old adage that it is better late than never, here goes.

Generally speaking, I think the pundits on the right did a good job of explaining that part of the conservative position in this controversy that has to do with the legal aspects concerning the separation of church and state. What was lacking in their spirited arguments, however, was any attempt to trace the roots of the dispute back beyond the establishment clause in the Constitution. And largely because of this, they failed to provide any meaningful insights into the consequences attendant to this fight, beyond offering a few banal assertions as to the importance of religion to the nation's founders and to many Americans today.

So this week, I thought I would provide a brief look at the history of the centuries old dispute within Western civilization over the role of religion in society. And, with this historical perspective in mind, I would like to offer some thoughts on the importance of this battle to the future of the great American experiment in representative democracy.

For starters, it is essential to understand that the attempt to rid the American public square of religious meaning is part of a movement that began in Europe in the 17th century, when philosophers such as Descartes, Newton, and Bacon argued, each in his own way, that nothing should be considered true unless rational grounds for believing it to be true were established.

None of these men openly attacked Christianity, largely because they would have been in considerable legal trouble had they done so. But their skepticism concerning anything that could not be proved conclusively, along with their advocacy of scientific and philosophical inquiry as a

Subscriptions to The Political Forum are available by contacting:
The Political Forum
8563 Senedo Rd., Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842
Tel 540-477-9762, Fax 540-477-3359, Email melcher@thepoliticalforum.com,
or visit us at www.thepoliticalforum.com

substitute for faith, laid the groundwork for the all-out grand assault against Christianity that was to come later during that period referred to by historians as the Enlightenment.

Descartes, for example, publicly attacked those individuals and their followers, who, he claimed, drew their beliefs from "the ancient books, their histories and their fables." These were, Descartes said, a "superstitious" lot, who had "weak minds," and consciences agitated by "repentances and remorse." He argued that a "new method" for addressing the mysteries of life must be found that is mathematical, or reason-based.

As noted above, the highly skeptical philosophical notions raised by these and other philosophers of the period set the stage for the Enlightenment, which swept across Europe in the 18th century, propelled by the writings of such men as Locke and Hume in England, Kant in Germany, and Voltaire and Rousseau in France.

This movement emphasized the use of reason to scrutinize previously accepted truths that were based on faith. Its most distinguishing characteristic was a fervent belief that human history represents a steady, linear progression toward an ever more perfect human condition, and that this "progress" could be accelerated by the application of science, tolerance, rationality, equality, and benevolent good will, or brotherly love.

This view that "progress" is the key to saving mankind contrasts with Christian doctrine that man himself cannot perfect man; that each man's purpose on Earth is to save himself, not society; and that, as St. Augustine argued, the temporal ebb and flow of rulers and nations has no meaning.

This may be viewed, at first blush, as a petty dispute. But as Eric Voegelin pointed out, the Enlightenment view of the meaning of history leads to a vastly different approach to government and economics than does the Christian view. Space does not allow for elaboration on this point, but for starters, Voegelin noted that the Enlightenment position inevitably leads a society's members to believe that their particular society is an integral part of some grand historical order; that they are somehow ordained to advance the cause of mankind. This, he said, leads to the belief, despite any experience to the contrary, that their values are unassailable.

One inevitable consequence of this, he says, is political fanaticism, which can take many forms but always encompasses the belief that government action, rather than individual spiritual improvement, is the pathway to society's salvation.

Needless to say, this is exactly what happened in France, where the anti-Christian aspects of the Enlightenment reached a crescendo under the influence of such men as Voltaire and Rousseau. These men went well beyond the skeptical inferences of their early Enlightenment predecessors and their contemporaries in other nations by defiantly attacking the Christian establishment. Voltaire's famous verbal assault on the Catholic Church, "Ecrasez l'infame!" ("Crush the infamous thing!") is among the best known examples of the vehement anti-religious sentiments they expressed.

The French revolution was the most important consequence of their efforts. And despite the high sounding ideals that were said to justify this earth shattering event, it eventually deteriorated into

political fanaticism and a vast blood bath known as the “Reign of Terror,” when the organizers became frustrated that the goodness of their ideals was not recognized by all the citizens.

This revolution set the stage for the Napoleonic wars, which devastated Europe, and created the social and political mire out of which emerged socialism and communism. Together these two murderous and economically disastrous ideologies turned the anti-religious *social* and *philosophical* movement that had simmered in Europe for almost two centuries into a powerful, anti-religious *political* movement, which swept across Europe like a pestilence.

Not all of Europe’s intellectuals climbed aboard the collectivist bandwagon, but even those who were put off by the intellectually stifling and socially unrealistic constructs of socialism and communism were drawn to Enlightenment-inspired questioning of Judeo-Christian principles.

In England, for example, the great nominalist John Stuart Mill relentlessly challenged some of the most basic tenets of Judeo-Christian thought, ranging from the concept of original sin to the idea that right and wrong are absolutes defined by God and set forth in the Decalogue.

Mill rejected the former because he thought it barred the way to any improvement in the status of man. He rejected the latter in favor of his own theory that the determination of whether one thing is right and another wrong, or that one thing is bad and another good, has nothing to do with divine providence but is a reflection of many years of practical human experience, handed down from one generation to another, based on preferences and guided by reason.

Another of England’s influential liberal “thinkers” of that day was Robert Owen, who argued that because men are products of their environment, the religious edict that men are responsible for their actions is not true. In fact, he argued that in this error lies the origin of evil because it substitutes the “invented” theologies of mankind’s ancient ancestors for the “Laws of Nature.”

By the end of the 19th century, largely as a result of this Enlightenment onslaught, the influence of Christianity in Europe was in steep decline. In fact, this decline was so evident that Nietzsche was, in the late 1880s, not only able to declare, with little or no argument, that, so far as Europe was concerned, God was dead, but to make what proved to be some startlingly accurate and horrific predictions as to the consequences of this “truth,” which he claimed to have “uncovered.” Consider the following from *The Will to Power*.

“What I am telling is the story of the next two centuries. I am describing what is coming, what can no longer happen any differently: the rise of nihilism . . . This future speaks already through a hundred signs, this fate is announced everywhere; to this music of the future all ears are already turned. Our entire European culture has long been moving with a torture of tension that grows from decade to decade, as though approaching a catastrophe: agitated, violent, precipitate, like a river rushing toward its end, no longer taking thought, afraid to take thought.”

And this from *Ecce Homo*.

“For when truth enters into a fight with the lies of millennia, we shall have upheavals, a convulsion of earthquakes, a moving of mountains and valleys, the like of which has

never been dreamed of. The concept of politics will have merged entirely with a war of spirits; all power structures of the old society will have been exploded—all of them are based on lies: there will be wars the like of which have never yet been seen on earth. It is only beginning with me that the earth knows great politics.”

Just over a decade after these thoughts were written, Europe welcomed the arrival of the 20th century amid widespread labor strikes on the continent, the creation of a Labor Party in England, and reports that Germany was planning to build one of the largest naval fleets in the world.

It would be a century in which the horrors of Nietzsche’s prophecies would be realized. Or to put this same thought another way, it would be a century during which the world would witness for the first time in its history the actions of a group of powerful nations whose citizens had for two centuries been slowly substituting “reason” for God’s word and coming up with nihilism.

A mere 26 years after Nietzsche predicted the advent of “wars the like of which have never yet been seen on earth,” World War I broke out in Europe. It was a war that would witness the first use of poison gas, the first mass bombings of civilian targets, the first modern-day instance of genocide, the first use of machine guns and other such weaponry to inflict mass casualties. It was a war in which some nine million combatants would lose their lives. It was a war in which the bodies of half of those killed would never be identified or recovered from the battlefields.

The dust jacket of Niall Ferguson’s wonderful book on World War I, *The Pity of War*, lists several historical consequences of this conflict, among which are that it turned four great empires into a multitude of republics; condemned the world to its worst modern depression; spawned seven decades of Communist rule in Russia; mortgaged the British Empire; bled France dry; and ultimately made Germany a far more formidable threat than it had been.

What this dust jacket fails to note is that the war destroyed, just as Nietzsche said it would, what was left of the Christian-based power structures of the old European society. This assured the rapid spread of collectivism throughout Europe, which, in turn, assured that Nietzsche’s dead God would not be resurrected in the land once referred to as Christendom. And this assured that the “concept of politics” would dominate European affairs, which in turn assured that another world war would spring forth from that great continent that was ruled by “reason.”

In this Second World War, which would begin two decades after the first was over, millions more combatants would die, as well as millions more civilians. Entire cities would be incinerated. The practice of genocide would be industrialized. The *Chambers Dictionary of World History* notes the following about World War II in Europe.

Casualty figures are not easy to obtain accurately, but approximately 3 million Russians were killed in action, 3 million died as prisoners of war, 8 million people died in occupied Russia, and about 3 million in unoccupied Russia. Germany suffered 3.25 million military casualties, around 6 million total casualties . . . France lost a total of ½ million dead, and Britain and her commonwealth just over 600,000. The USA suffered just over 300,000 casualties. It is also estimated that in the course of the German occupation of a large part of Europe, about 6 million Jews were murdered in extermination and labour camps, along with a million or more other victims.

Needless to say, while all of this was going on in Europe, belief in God and a reverence for Judeo-Christian morality was thriving in the United States, as were the power structures that served as a foundation for the American society.

Yes, America's founders were strongly influenced by the Enlightenment ideals of liberty, justice, tolerance, rationality, equality, and brotherly love. And there can be little doubt that they were caught up in the belief in human "progress." And yes, there were several among them, who were not Christians, but deists.

But unlike the revolutionary leaders of Europe, they uniformly rejected the dark, anti-religious side of the Enlightenment, and built the government of the United States on the solid foundation of a belief in God. And they did it with the enthusiastic backing of the American people, who did not consider themselves lacking when John Adams asserted that the Constitution of the United States was "designed only for a moral and religious people."

Indeed, at the same time that Europe's intellectuals were setting the stage for the French revolution and the "Terror" that would follow, the American colonies were experiencing what became known as "The Great Awakening," a period of heightened religious enthusiasm, prompted in part by the Enlightenment-inspired attacks on religion in Europe.

In fact, as I pointed out in an article last February entitled "The Europeans Are Different From Us," (which can be read as a companion to this one), each time, in subsequent years, that the Europeans took another giant step toward the realization of Nietzsche's nightmarish predictions, Americans collectively reacted with a surge in religiosity.

There are many explanations for this, but I think the best one is that Americans have always instinctively recognized that the best defense against the scourge of socialism, communism and their ideological offspring, nihilism, is to strengthen the wall of traditional religious belief systems, which, as Marx and his neo-Hegelian, revolutionary compatriots recognized, is the greatest impediment to the advance of collectivist ideologies.

It wasn't until the mid-1960s, sometime subsequent to the assassination of President Kennedy, that the left organized a full-scale attack on the comfortable, even synergistic relationship between the American government and religion, which was recognized by Tocqueville as one of the great hallmarks of the American success story.

As I indicated earlier, conservatives have fought back in the intervening four decades with battalions of well meaning lawyers armed with well researched, well reasoned, and well argued interpretations of the establishment clause in the Constitution.

The result has been that they have lost one court battle after another, over such matters as prayer in school, crèches on public property, references to God during graduation ceremonies, and, of course, the recent skirmish in Alabama over the placement of an inscription of the Ten Commandments in a courthouse in Alabama.

And by all accounts, more such battles lie ahead over such matters as the phrase “In God We Trust” on U.S. currency, and eventually all references to God in Washington’s public buildings and in the ceremonies that accompany special governmental events, such as the opening of Congress and the Supreme Court and the swearing in of a new president.

Now I am not saying here that these legal attempts to rid the public square of religious meaning are in any way comparable to the wave of anti-religious sentiment that led to the French revolution. Nor am I saying that this conflict over religion portends the coming of wars and apocalyptic social upheavals.

But I think it is important to view this growing disagreement as something more than a legal dispute. It is, in fact, an indication of a deep disagreement within American society over an issue that lies at the very heart of the American experience, the outcome of which will eventually not be decided in the courts but in the public square itself.

It will, to borrow a thought from my old friend Claes Ryn, be decided by those individuals who shape the beliefs and imaginations of the American public: the poets, authors, teachers, architects, philosophers, religious visionaries, composers and song writers, singers and other entertainers, painters, artists, athletes, and those who control the increasingly influential world of the mass media, including those who write the ads. These are the people who, Claes notes, fashion and influence the way the public thinks about things. They are the real movers who, as he puts, it “ draw us into their way of experiencing the world.”

It is also important to understand that the implications of this battle for the soul of America are vast. It would be wrong to attempt to divine America’s future by viewing Europe’s past. But it is useful when considering the stakes involved to be able to trace the consequences of the decline in faith in Europe over the years and to be able to see first hand the nature of a society in which the centuries old moral order has been entirely replaced by Nietzsche’s “great politics.” (The following story by Steve offers some practical insights into this topic.)

In such a world, the great moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre noted, it is unsurprising that politics "oscillate between a freedom which is nothing but a lack of regulation of individual behavior and forms of collectivist control designed only to limit the anarchy of self-interest. The consequences of a victory by one side or the other are often of the highest immediate importance; but, as Solzhenitsyn has understood so well, both ways of life are in the long run intolerable.”

Bryan S. Turner, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Deakin University in Geelong, Australia, put the same thought this way in his introduction to Karl Lowith’s book *Max Weber and Karl Marx*.

“Having claimed that in modern civilization god is dead, Nietzsche was aware that new idols would fill the space which was left by this dead God; in particular, ‘the herd’ was increasingly subject to the state, which was the new idol that would rob people of their freedom.”

My closing comment on all of this is simple: pay attention America when the religious roots that underlie your society are challenged by people who offer no alternative support except nihilism and big government.

A WARNING TO THE U.S. FROM EUROPE. Last week, Mark wrote a piece in which he argued that traditional conservatism, complete with its repudiation of big government, is, for a variety of reasons, dying, and that this is, in the long run, a bad thing for American society.

There was a time, not too long ago, when this message would have been unassailable among conservative readers. But, as he noted, it has, of late, become difficult for many who call themselves “conservatives” to understand why they should be opposed to bigger and bigger government. In fact, as Mark pointed out, many “conservatives,” such as Fred Barnes from *The Weekly Standard*, consider “big government” the best means for achieving conservative goals.

These individuals feel that fretting and complaining about the size and scope of government is no longer their responsibility; that such carping is a chore best left to those elements on the libertarian fringes who run around the country bellowing strange stories about “Big Brother.”

In their estimation, support for tax cuts and a stronger military, coupled with vocal opposition to the wackiest aspects of the modern left, is a sufficient counter to the statism of the modern left, and qualifies as a strongly conservative platform. I would argue that this is not the case.

The state, while a vital component of civil society, is not the sole component. Far from it. The state is also a great usurper, and as it grows, it appropriates those functions that once were the preserve of other vital components of civil society, including the Church, the community, and most notably, the family. What the “big government conservatives” like Barnes fail to grasp is that big government is inimical to those institutions and traditions that they purport to cherish. Big government is, indeed, wholly hostile to that which conservatives should want to conserve.

Now, I know that this sounds like a rather esoteric argument; one that pundits, analysts, or academics might make on paper, but which has little or no practical relevance to the real world, and which is unverifiable anyway. But this is not so. This is an argument that has serious real world implications which can, in some cases, mean the difference between life and death.

Indeed, one need look no further than Europe, and France in particular, this past summer to see the destruction wreaked by the rise of big government and the concomitant decline of civil institutions, most importantly, the family.

According to France’s largest undertaker, General Funeral Services, 15,000 people died there in this summer’s heat wave. And while this number is significantly higher than the official estimates, even the government concedes that better than 11,000 died, and these estimates have not been updated to account for any deaths that took place in the last half of August. As columnist Mark Steyn put it recently:

That would make . . . [the] brutal Iraqi summer about one five-thousandth as lethal as the brutal Gallic summer, which has killed more people than the brutal Afghan winter (now 23 months behind schedule), the brutal Iraqi summer and the searing heat of the Guantanamo torture camps combined and multiplied by a thousand.

In any case, this was a truly remarkable number of deaths for any natural occurrence, all the more so in this case, because they were caused not by a hurricane, earthquake, flood, or other such rampage, but by a handful of rather warm days. And, in relative terms, the days weren't even all that warm. A recent Associated Press piece noted that the killer heat wave "brought suffocating temperatures of up to 104 Fahrenheit in the first two weeks of August."

Now, I'll concede that that's pretty hot. But I'll also guarantee you that it was much hotter in many other places in the world during that same period of time, yet in none of these places were there reports of 15,000 people perishing as a result. Indeed, I'd be willing to bet dollars to doughnuts that it was just as hot, if not hotter at the Bush ranch in Crawford, Texas, where our President spent his days clearing brush and planning a war at the same time that France's elderly were dying.

So the question is why the many deaths among France's elderly, and to a far lesser extent, but still in significant numbers, Italy's elderly. That depends, I suppose, on whom one asks. The French government, apparently, has determined that responsibility lies with "hospital understaffing, bureaucratic delays and insufficient care for the elderly," or so says a new report released by last week. Jean-Felix Bernard, president of France's Conseil National de l'Air, described by *Reuters* as "an air quality agency attached to the Environment Ministry," argued that pollution was the culprit in several thousand of the deaths. And the AP suggested that a lack of modern convenience was the culprit, noting that in France, "air conditioning is rare."

And while all of these factors probably played some role, the real culprit in this mess, this bizarre human tragedy, appears to be plain old fashioned indifference. It seems that no one cared too much about those who died, and thus no one did much to try to help them. Moreover, once they were dead, no one cared enough even to come claim them, at least a great many of them.

As it turns out, the heat wave that gripped France came at an exceptionally inconvenient time for the French. July and August are when much of France shuts down and goes on vacation. And while on vacation, too many French, by their own admission and that of their political leaders, simply couldn't be bothered to worry a whole lot about their elderly relatives literally roasting to death back home.

According to an August 28 article in *The International Herald Tribune*, the debate in France and Italy, where an additional thousand or so people died from the heat, "broadened to a general discussion on the dissolution of the traditionally tight-knit family structure." "Many older people died, it is said," the *IHT* noted, "because they had been abandoned by families going on vacation."

Sadly, that's not even the worst of it. Literally hundreds of corpses were stored throughout Paris in both real and makeshift refrigerated morgues for weeks because the same relatives who couldn't be bothered to interrupt their vacations to assure their alleged "loved ones" were alive, also couldn't be bothered to interrupt their vacations to claim the old gal after she'd already died.

According to *The New York Times*, Bernard Mazeyrie, a managing director of General Funeral Services, confirmed that many relatives simply didn't want their holiday weekends screwed up by an old relative who'd had the discourtesy to die inopportunistly. The *Times* reported that

Mazeyrie told them “Some [of the notified families] . . . informed of the death of relatives, postponed funerals, not to interrupt the August 15 holiday weekend, and left the bodies in the refrigerated hall.”

Two weeks after the heat wave had ended and the last of the corpses had piled up, some 400 remained “unclaimed.” Of those, only 57 were finally determined to have no family to claim them. The families of the remaining 340-plus had to be tracked down by a special government task force and compelled to come pick up their “loved one.”

Of course, one could make up any number of explanations why the French don’t care much about their elderly, so little in fact that they would let them die before letting them become an inconvenience. But such conjecture is mostly unnecessary, as the answer is pretty clear to anyone who is paying attention.

As the *IHT* noted above, “tight-knit family structure” is dying throughout Europe. And the reason it is dying is because in the big-government, socialist nanny states of the EU, the family structure is no longer all that necessary. Whereas the family, the Church, or even the community at large, once took responsibility for the aged, today the ubiquitous state has assumed the responsibility.

In the wake of the heat wave deaths, one of France’s largest daily newspapers, *Le Parisien*, opined that, “It is not up to the state to take care of our elderly. It is up to us.” But nothing could be further from the truth. The leviathan governments of Europe have usurped the role and the responsibility of the family with regard to the aged, in this case with deadly consequences. Mark Steyn summed up the situation perfectly, as follows.

In Paris this spring, a government official explained to me how Europeans had created a more civilised society than America - socialised healthcare, shorter work weeks, more holidays. We’ve just seen where that leads: gran’ma turned away from the hospital to die in an airless apartment because junior’s *sur la plage*. M. Chirac’s somewhat tetchy suggestion that his people should rethink their attitude to the elderly was well taken. But Big Government inevitably diminishes its citizens’ capacity to take responsibility, to the point where even your dead mum is just one more inconvenience the state should do something about.

Now, one would think that this mess that has transpired over the last few weeks in France would provide a wake-up call for Americans. One would think that the impact that big government has had on the social structure of Europe would serve as a cautionary tale for Americans, particularly those that purport to be conservatives. But that, apparently, is not the case. Even in the wake of one of Europe’s greatest big-government-induced tragedies since the big government of 1930s Germany exercised its supremacy to murder 12 million innocents, erstwhile American conservatives seem not to understand that the state is not and cannot be the source of all that is good in society.

Over the past several weeks, for example, we have witnessed the truly bizarre spectacle of Alabama’s Republican Governor Robert Riley, who ran as a conservative last fall and scored a dramatic upset over incumbent Don Siegelman, but who has since proposed to triple the state’s

taxes in an attempt to bolster and expand the reach and scope of government. Among other rationales that the Governor offered in his plea to have the state's voters ratify his tax hike was the claim that it was their "Christian duty" to pony up and support his expansion of state services.

Brother Riley, who also teaches Bible study classes in Montgomery, appears to be more than just a touch confused about the differences between true Christian charity and the unfeeling, unthinking, uncaring act of simply turning the responsibility for one's neighbor over to the state. One involves the giver in the fate and well-being of the recipient, while the other involves the "giver" in little more than filling in a form and taking it to the post office.

Perhaps if this purported conservative spent more time boning up on the basic principles of the conservative mindset, he would not suffer such bouts of disorientation. As conservative icon Alexis de Tocqueville put it in his tome *Memoir on Pauperism*, private charity (or Christian charity, if you prefer) is a "manly and reasoned virtue," while public charity is a "weak and unreflecting notion," that "breaks the only link between" rich and poor." Relative to the poor, Tocqueville further noted that it "ranges each one under a banner, tallies them, and bringing them face to face, prepares them for combat," and "inflames society's sores."

Of course, one could hardly expect Riley to know or care much about any of that. As far as he's concerned, government simply does good things, like fund the schools. And bigger government can do bigger, better things, like fund the schools at ever higher levels. Sadly, he's hardly alone in believing such, even among his fellow "conservatives." Sigh.

Post Script: The incomparable Mark Steyn, who is quoted above, penned another inspired column for yesterday's *Chicago Sun Times* on the murder last week of Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh, in which he further illuminates the perils of Big Government. As with the heat-related deaths in France, Steyn suggests that Ms. Lind's death is also related to with the ascent of European statism and the attendant decline in Europeans' will to take care of themselves, or their friends, neighbors, and family members. "There seem to have been," Steyn notes, "an awful lot of bystanders to Lindh's stabbing – in broad daylight, in a crowded Stockholm department store, after being pursued by her assailant up an escalator. Granted that most of the people bystanding around were women, it still seems odd – at least from this side of the Atlantic – that no one attempted to intervene or halt the blood-drenched killer as he calmly left the store."

"You can blame it on a lack of police, as everyone's doing," Steyn continued, "but Lindh's killer didn't get away with it because of the people who weren't there but because of the people who were: the bystanders." As Steyn put it: "To expect the government to save you is to be a bystander in your own fate."

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