

Bill Barr's Hostility

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Attorney General William Barr believes fervently in the free exercise of religion — for religious believers, or at least for those who fall within the “Judeo-Christian” category. But for anyone whose exercise of religious freedom involves rejecting religion, he harbors a distinct hostility.

He made his feelings clear in a recent lecture at the University of Notre Dame’s de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture. Thomas Jefferson wrote that “it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.” Barr doesn’t see things that way.

Jefferson thought the government should not tell Americans how or even whether to worship. Barr, by contrast, has no reservation about using his Cabinet post to preach the indispensable value of Christianity and the bottomless evils of religious skepticism. He treats the absence of faith as a threat — not only to believers but also to our entire society and system of government.

He complains that secularists are forcing religious people to “subscribe to practices and policies that are antithetical to their faith.” One of his examples is a new Illinois law that requires history classes in public schools to include “the roles and contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in the history of this country and this state.”

It’s true that people who regard homosexuality as an abomination would rather not be confronted with the reality that many important people in history were gay. But that doesn’t mean they are entitled to suppress that fact.

Would Barr object if the law required acknowledgment of the historic role of Catholics? Protestants who regard Catholicism as a pagan cult would prefer not to read about their contributions. To call such a curriculum “a monstrous invasion of religious liberty,” however, would be absurd.

Barr comes close to denying the rights of nonbelievers to express their disbelief. Secularists, he charges, “have marshaled all the force of mass communications, popular culture, the entertainment industry and academia in an unremitting assault on religion and traditional values.”

Even if that were true, the First Amendment fully protects their right to do so. If Smith is free to warn that atheists can expect eternal agony, Jones is free to call religion a mammoth fraud. Barr strenuously objects to secularists who “hold up to ridicule” religious people. Does he think freedom ends where mocking begins?

He says that those who hold on to religious faith “risk a figurative burning at the stake — social, education, and professional ostracism.” But plenty of nonbelievers who live in heavily religious communities know they would be courting trouble to let their inclinations be known. It was Christians, by the way, who burned people at the stake — though not figuratively.

The attorney general blames all the ills of modern society on agnostics, atheists and people who sleep late on Sunday. Thanks to the “growing ascendancy of secularism and the doctrine of moral relativism,” he reports, “virtually every measure of social pathology continues to gain ground,” including suicide and “illegitimacy.” People can remain free only if they are moral, he suggests, and they can be moral only if they are religious.

But his diagnosis happens to be a fantasy. At the top of the list of the freest countries in the world, compiled by the libertarian Cato Institute, are New Zealand, Switzerland, Australia and Canada. Their citizens are far less religious than those in the United States — which ranks only 17th in freedom.

Nor does their irreligiosity bring about rampant chaos and savage depravity. Crime is far more common here than in such secular havens as Japan, Sweden and Estonia. In this country, the two states with the highest rate of births to unmarried mothers are Mississippi and Louisiana — which are among the highest in church attendance.

New Hampshire, on the other hand, has the second-lowest church attendance and the lowest murder rate. A wealth of real-world experience proves that religion does not prevent social ills and that secularism does not cause them.

Today, 23% of Americans claim “no religion.” The attorney general of the United States, whether he likes it or not, has a duty to uphold their rights and accept their choices.

Christians have a right to practice their faith but not to have it validated by the government or protected from vigorous criticism. Freedom of religion also applies to nonbelievers.