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- [Home](#)
- [What is the Secular Right?](#)
- [Contributors](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Comments policy](#)
- [FAQ](#)

Switcher

[Home](#) > [Uncategorized](#) > The Pope rebukes the Czech Republic

## The Pope rebukes the Czech Republic

September 28th, 2009 - Heather Mac Donald

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Vaclav Klaus, president of the Czech Republic, gave an [unapologetic defense](#) of capitalism at the Cato Institute last week. The recent economic crisis did not result from too much economic liberty, he argued, nor would it be solved by greater government control over businessmen and investors. He spoke eloquently of the Czech Republic's determined post-Communist recreation of a market system. (This [Cato essay](#) from 2007 gives a good round-up of Klaus's thinking; he identifies the three most serious threats to Western freedom at present as complacency that the central planning instinct is a thing of the past; the attack on state sovereignty:

Freedom and democracy — those two precious values — cannot be secured without parliamentary democracy within a clearly defined state territory. Yet that is exactly what the current European political elites and their fellow travelers are attempting to eliminate.

I was surprised, therefore, to read of the [Pope's rebuke](#) of the Czech Republic for its secularism (nearly half of respondents in a recent poll said that they did not believe in God):

Your country, like other nations, is experiencing cultural conditions that often present a radical challenge to faith and therefore also to hope.

No one can gainsay the essential and courageous role of Catholics in helping bring down Communism in Czechoslovakia. Yet it would seem that this small country has done pretty well in creating social stability and free economic exchange—which depends on trust—without a pervasive religiosity.

We are a calm nation that drinks beer and eats dumplings, and we have strong antibodies to any kind of religious persuasion because of our history,

the Rev. Ales Opatrny, a lecturer at the Catholic Theological Faculty of Charles University in Prague, told the *New York Times*. “I believe that after the pope's visit most Czechs will act like nothing happened.”

Is that such a bad thing? The Pope warned in Brno that

history had demonstrated the absurdities to which man descends when he excludes God from the horizon of his choices and actions.

History has also demonstrated that including God in one's horizons can lead to such absurdities as torture for scientific inquiry, burnings and stonings of heretics, religious wars, and terrorism. Can we call it a wash? Had Communism's proponents professed a belief in God (and many devout Christians support radical socialism), it still would have failed on the world stage because of its refusal to acknowledge the complexity of markets. Arguably its most fatal weakness was its utter misunderstanding of economics and civil society, not its atheism.

The Pope admonished the Czechs that without faith, there can be no hope. Here are some other possible bases for hope: Confidence in the entrepreneurial creativity of one's fellow citizens. Awe at ever-accelerating information technology, which is unleashing an explosion of discovery, expression, and the exchange of ideas. Gratitude for medical science, chemistry, and physics, which produce a constant improvement in human existence. Delight in the ongoing recording of Antonio Vivaldi's operas.

Religion's proponents will of course argue that Western society is nevertheless running out of steam as faith loses its dominance. They might be making that argument for a long time. Meanwhile, it's certainly interesting that during the Bush years, theocons regularly argued that Europe's distaste for the Iraq war was the result of its atheism-induced moral degeneracy. Now we learn, however, that ally Czech Republic easily matches Europe's secularism.



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1. September 28th, 2009 at 18:47 | [#1](#)

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John

If Vaclav Klaus wants to run for President, he'd have my support. We'd have to find a way around that "natural born citizen" rule.

2. September 29th, 2009 at 00:09 | [#2](#)

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Aaron

This is simultaneously cloying, banal, and outrageous:

reedom and democracy — those two precious values — cannot be secured without parliamentary democracy within a clearly defined state territory.

Where to begin? Well, not by sitting through a 50-minute speech by some Eastern European politician, that's for sure. So I admit up front that I don't have the context of his claim, since Heather Mac Donald didn't provide it in her post either. So let's look at that one sentence.

"Freedom" and "democracy" are notorious polemical weasel words that mean anything the rhetorician wants them to mean. If his idea of freedom is Western Europe, then obviously that's not the kind of freedom supported by Secular Right or its (mostly libertarian?) readership. The more common words on the right for this kind of "freedom" are "managerial state", "technocracy", "mass democracy", "big