

History proves Reagan right on religious issue

The outpouring of editorial indignation at Reagan's "religion and politics" remark is more a testimony to the shallowness of the popular American mind than it represents a justified outrage at a president who has overstepped his role in society.

Jim Rogers

His statement seems so patently true that it scarce needs justification. Yet some members of the press and public seem to doubt the religious nature of the modern secular state.

Reagan remarked at a Dallas prayer breakfast that politics and religion are closely connected. Harvard law professor Harold J. Berman observes in his truly seminal work, *Law and Revolution*, that in the 19th and 20th centuries there was a "very gradual reduction of traditional religion to the level of a personal, private matter . . . while other belief systems — new secular religions (ideologies, "isms") — were raised to the level of passionate faiths for which people collectively were willing not only to die but also to live new lives.

"Liberal democracy was the first great secular religion in Western history — the first ideology which became divorced from traditional Christianity and at the same time took over from traditional Christianity both its sense of the sacred and some of its major values."

The lamentable aspect of the current outrage expressed over Reagan's remark is that it is based upon a superficial understanding of the nature of religion. Too often the term "religion" is thought

to only include traditional theism.

However, modern thinkers correctly understand that the term logically includes non-theistic beliefs as well. The gist of this modern thought is that the individual's answer to the fundamental questions of existence is the defining characteristic of religion. In this sense every thinking person, including the anti-theist and agnostic, are religious. In this sense also, the term "ideology" becomes synonymous with the term "religion."

The U.S. Supreme Court recognized this understanding of religion when, in a 1961 case, it included Secular Humanism "among religions in this country which do not teach what would generally be considered a belief in the existence of God."

Given this new understanding we are able to realize that the core values of the First Amendment are just as threatened with a secular state as it is with a more conventionally understood theocracy.

Two law professors in a 1980 Harvard Civil Rights — Civil Liberties Law Review article mused that "the imposition of secular values may constitute as significant an interference with First Amendment values as the imposition of religious beliefs.

"Yet . . . the Court has left the establishment of other ideologies untouched." They wondered about Thomas Jefferson's "post mortem feelings" on the issue: "Would he perhaps grieve that the First Amendment reads 'religion' instead of 'ideology'?"

Modern analysis completely undermines the rationale of the public outcry over Reagan's remark about the necessary relationship between religion and politics. Indeed, if secular belief is not "neu-

tral," as popular misconception has it, then, in the words of Presbyterian theologian R. J. Rushdoony, "no disestablishment of religion as such is possible in any society. A church can be disestablished, and a particular religion can be supplanted by another, but the change is simply to another religion. Since the foundations of law are inescapably religious, no society exists without a religious foundation or without a law system which codifies the morality of its religion."

The paradigm case for exclusion of the explicitly religious from meaningful political dialogue is asserted to be that of "religious wars." However, secularism has not solved the plague of religious war, in fact it has exacerbated the problem to horrendous proportions.

Erich Goldhagen, a Harvard expert on the Holocaust, and a recent visitor to Lincoln, reportedly concluded that "although genocide has occurred for centuries, it has become more common in the 20th century, largely because of the rise of 'powerful secular ideologies' that seek to destroy the old society in order to produce a new one."

Additionally, as Professor Berman writes, the pronounced secular religions of the Enlightenment gave birth to the "exaggerated nationalism" of the 19th century. We should not need to be reminded that the product of this avowedly secular period were two wars of a magnitude heretofore never imagined and a score of lesser wars. If religiously inspired war is our criterion for involvement in politics, the secularist does not have much over which to boast.

"Secular" is not to be equated with "neutral." Secular viewpoints are just as religious as those of

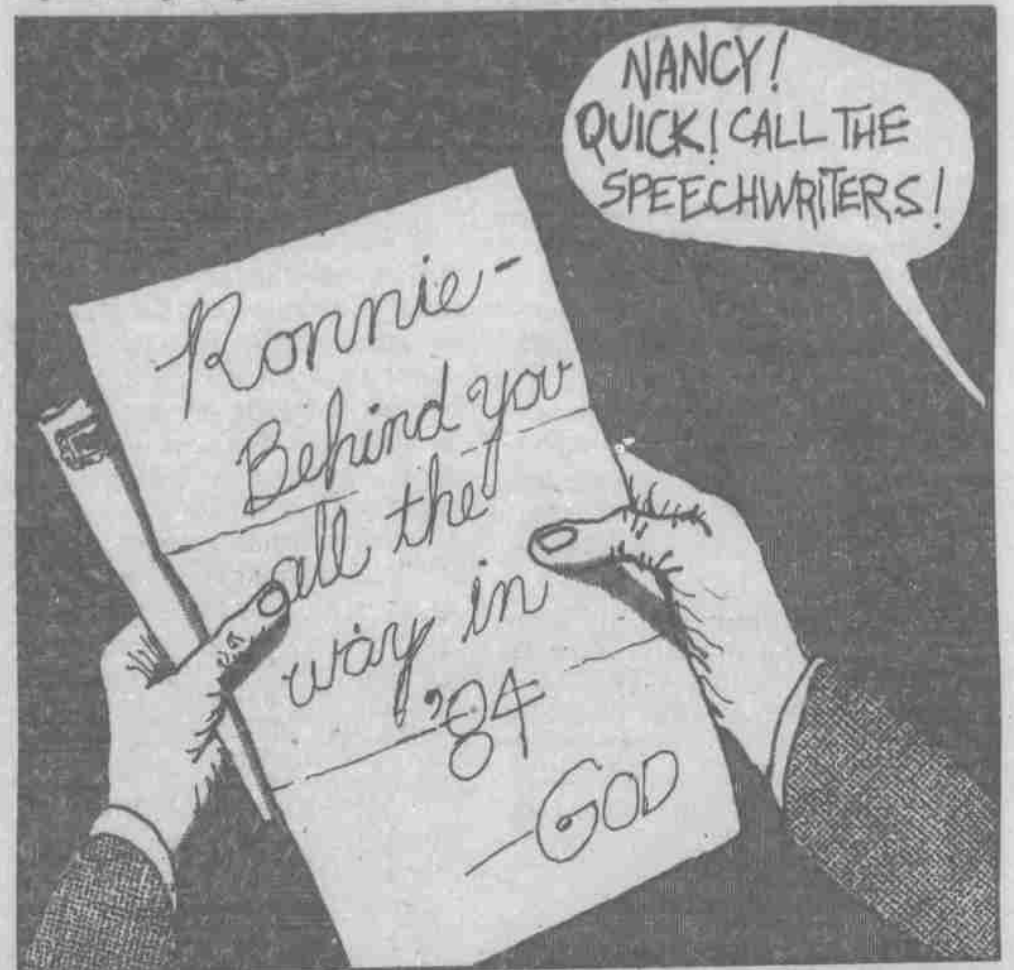
the most theocratic Christian. Given this idea, it is simply absurd to argue, as the Lincoln Star did in a recent editorial, that "(t)he absolute truth is that religion and politics do not mix and that is one of the most fundamental truths on which this nation was founded."

Even the most cursory of reflections upon the nature of the state and the nature of religion would have prevented an individual from penning such silliness — it represents argument from mindless platitude. Yet, fundamentally, it is thoughtful reflection which has been so lacking in the editorial critiques of Reagan's remarks.

The myth of the neutral, non-religious, secular state is dead. If the state is not explicitly and honestly religious, then it is surreptitiously religious as evidenced

by the modern state's claim to "neutrality." If we are honest, we won't mistake the uncontrolled spasms of a dead myth for signs of real life.

A Fordham University political science professor provides us with an appropriate insight into the future when the necessarily religious nature of politics is finally understood: "The pluralist game will continue to be played, of course, because there is no other game in town. But there is no need for it to keep on being a confidence game in which one side proclaims its cause as neutrality and the other side is gullible enough to believe it. . . . We shall play the pluralist game more honestly, perhaps even with better results, if we admit openly what the game is and what stakes we are playing for."



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