

Religious Pluralism and Social Anarchy

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

On July 4th I hoped for a relaxing day of vacation, a good barbecued steak with Christian friends, and a firework display at night. Instead, the fireworks went off inside me. Seems one cannot read the daily paper -- even one as conservative as *The Orange County Register* -- without suffering the indignity of being sold the ethical and historical nonsense that completely open, religious pluralism is foundational to the freedom we enjoy as Americans.

It might not have been such a big deal. After all, I am not unaccustomed to reading this kind of weak, poorly reasoned opinion by Christian writers who oppose theonomic ethics and have wandered into political philosophy without due reflection about presuppositions and consequences of what they say. But the source of my indignation was a column by the libertarian teacher of political philosophy at Auburn University in Alabama, Tibor Machan. He is paid to reason somewhat more cogently than this.

What made me angry, though, was the way in which Professor Machan took it into hand to edit the words of "The Declaration of Independence" in the interest of the religious pluralism he advocates. Here is historical revisionism with a vengeance!

In an article entitled "Core Principles Unite the States of America," Machan's concern was to argue that America's greatness has absolutely nothing to do with religious unity. Unlike other countries, it is not a "homogeneous group whose ideas and ideals are nearly uniform" -- as they would be, say, in something like a family with its close personal ties and "unity of concerns and obligations." Rather, Machan rejoices, in America we are free to have differing objectives, ideals, pursuits and concerns. To join the nation (as he did in 1961), people need "to be human beings who respect the rights of their fellows to live freely, that is all." "Nor need they worship at the same altars," he hastens to assert. "One may be Roman Catholic, Hindu, agnostic, Hari Krishna, or Amish to live in America."

Here is the heart of the column: "What makes America unique among communities is its openness to the pursuit of innumerable goals, provided the rights of all persons are respected. No one God need be worshipped, no set of rituals practiced, no single standard of worthiness needs to be maintained in order to be a citizen of this country." What a mishmash of half-truths and philosophical flaws. But the epitome of religious pluralism was Machan's misquotation of "The Declaration of Independence," as saying that "all men are created equal and are endowed by their creators [sic] with inalienable rights...."

A double typographical error? (lower case, pluralized) Probably not. So I missed my afternoon nap on Independence Day. I took up my combined loves of Christian apologetics and ethics, tried to restrain my word-count, and composed a letter to the editor. (I would recommend that as Christians we should make judicious use of this avenue for publicly challenging the secular nonsense of our age.) Here's what I wrote.

"Dear Editor:

"Intellectual honesty calls for an objection to be raised to Mr. Machan's calculated misquotation of The Declaration of Independence in revisionist service to his philosophical prejudices. He may well disagree with the signers, but rewriting history is not in his prerogative.

"The Declaration asserts all men have certain inalienable rights, having been "endowed by their Creator" -- not, as Machan renders it, "endowed by their creators." This editing serves Machan's subsequent (unargued) opinion that "no one God... no single standard" is prerequisite to the rights and liberties enjoyed by our citizens; they need not "worship at the same altars."

"However, for a philosophy instructor, fallacious reasoning or arbitrary pontification may be worse than fraudulent quotation. If the source and definition of rights is, as Machan contends, many "creators" (whether divine or human), he cannot make intelligible or authorize the prerequisite -- which he admits in the same article -- of social "unity" on at least some "basic principles" regarding rights (like respecting the freedom of others, wearing clothes in public, etc.).

"If the authority for those principles derives from nothing more than individual human choice and contract, their authority likewise ends whenever individuals choose -- and leaves unexplained the (apparently involuntary) moral duty to keep one's contracts. Many "creators" is the formula for social anarchy, not freedom."