

## **ATHEISTS WON'T SAVE EUROPE**

**By Don Feder**

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An article in *The Wall Street Journal* (April 12) breathlessly informs us of the latest fad on the Incredible Shrinking Continent - - “As Religious Strife Grows, Europe’s Atheists Seize Pulpit: Islam’s Rise Gives Boost To Militant Unbelievers; The Celebrity Hedonist,” the headline teases.

The “Celebrity Hedonist,” isn’t geriatric frat-boy Hugh Hefner, but Michel Onfray, a 48-year-old author dubbed “France’s high-priest of atheism” in the Journal piece.

Reporter Andrew Higgins describes the doyen of disbelief -- commander of the faith-less -- strutting onto the stage of Caen’s 500-seat Alexis de Tocqueville auditorium, dressed in black from head to toe, to deliver the latest two-hour installment in his on-going lecture series, “Hedonist Philosophy,” to a packed house.

Hedonism popular in France? You heard it here first.

Apparently, the Hedonist Philosophy does not consist of “pass the bonbons and heated body-oil” (that would be the Playboy philosophy, as Hefner pretentiously calls his mental mutterings) but includes such priceless gems as, “To enjoy and make others enjoy without doing ill to yourself or to others, this is the foundation of all morality.” Catchy.

Did Mother Teresa enjoy picking the dying off the streets of Calcutta? But is not enjoyment the foundation of all morality?

According to the Journal, the rise of secularism on steroids is spurred by “alarm over Islam .... Europe’s Muslim population, estimated at between 15 and 20 million, is growing more numerous, more vocal and, in some cases, more religious,” as well as the nagging fear that “religion is making a comeback.”

Among other signs of an increasingly assertive impiety, the article cites a debate in London last month, where atheists and believers squared off over the proposition: “We’d be better off without God” (according to a vote of the audience, the atheists won by an almost 2-to-1 margin), a spate of belief-bashing books (including Christopher Hitchens forthcoming “God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything”), a German furniture manufacturer who’s funding an “Enlightenment think-tank,” Britain’s National Secular Society (whose membership doubled in 4 years, to a staggering 7,000 – there are individual churches in the U.S with more members) and the declaration of that great thinker, Elton John, that religion turns people into “hateful lemmings” and should be banned – some have said the same of his music.

Militant atheism in the land of Jacobinism? What is it the French say, “The more things change, the more they remain the same.”

French atheism of today is a shadow of its former self. Anti-clericalism reached its high-water mark during the Reign of Terror. On September 2, 1792, three Catholic bishops and more than 200 priests were massacred by a Parisian street mob. Priests and nuns were among the mass executions in Lyon and hundreds were imprisoned in what were described as “abominable conditions” in the port city of Rochefort.

The anti-religious tradition of Revolutionary France was bequeathed on to the two 20<sup>th</sup> century ideologies it spawned – Nazism and communism. In the Soviet Union, from 1922-1941,

The League of the Militant Godless organized and directed atheistic agit-prop.

By 1941, the League had more than 3.5 million members and 96,000 offices across the country. Still, God always has the last laugh. When Mikhail Gorbachev met John Paul II, the former confided that his grandmother had him baptized in the Russian Orthodox Church as a child.

As for a religious renaissance in Europe, Onfray and his allies needn't worry.

True, there was a fuss when the new European Constitution engaged in historical revisionism on a grand scale, by refusing to acknowledge the continent's Christian roots stretching back a millennium.

Aleksander Kwasnieski, then president of Poland, observed: "I am an atheist and everybody knows it, but there are no excuses for making references to ancient Greece and Rome, without making references to the Christian values which are so important to the development of Europe."

Protests over the EU bureaucracy's re-writing of history aside, for many Europeans, faith is increasingly irrelevant. Europe has the lowest church-attendance in the world.

Not coincidentally, the continent is in a demographic tail-spin. Of the 10 nations with the lowest birthrates, nine are in Europe (the 10<sup>th</sup> is Japan). Currently, 1.5 children are born for every woman in the EU. In some countries, the rate is as low as 1.1.

It takes 2.1 births per woman merely to replace current population. If present trends continue, Europe's population could

decline by 88 million in the next 15 years – a loss of 23% of its 2000 population.

*Why not coincidentally?* From religion comes hope for the future and a sense of societal obligation (i.e., a non-hedonistic worldview). No faith, no hope. No hope for the future, no sense of obligation – hence, no children.

The United States has both the highest birthrate (2.11) and the highest church attendance in the industrialized world. Domestically, demographic differences parallel religious observance. Salt Lake City and Tupelo, Mississippi have higher fertility rates than Manhattan and San Francisco.

It makes perfect sense (in a cosmic sense). Consider: “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live,” Deuteronomy, 30:1. You choose life (God), you get life (descendants). You choose death, you don’t.

I don’t know who represented faith in the London debate, but it couldn’t have been the A-Team. By every index, active believers are happier, healthier, more successful and more charitable than secularists. Karl Zinsmeister documented this in his recent article “Good Faith,” in *American Enterprise Magazine*.

- A Harvard study showed inner-city youth with a “strong religious orientation” 54% less likely to use drugs than their peers.
- According to the U.S. government’s National Survey of Family Growth, only 7% of couples who attend services once a month will divorce within the first 5 years of marriage. The rate for those who go to church once a year or less is 2 ½ times higher.

- Statistics from the charitable clearing house Independent Sector show that, on average, weekly churchgoers donate 3.8% of their income to charity, compared to 0.8% for those who never go.
- According to a University of Chicago nationwide survey of 2,000 physicians (not cited by Zinsmeister), 2 in 5 doctors think belief in God reduces the incidence of a host of diseases and other health problems – including heart attacks.

What do atheists have to offer in place of God to give meaning to life – democracy, human rights, reason, la dolce vita?

The dignity of the individual was first proclaimed at Sinai. The Torah sets forth individual rights and responsibilities. Democracy got a huge impetus from the Protestant Reformation.

From the French Revolution to the blood-drenched isms of the 20<sup>th</sup>. century, more people were killed in the name of reason – liberty, equality and fraternity, or “scientific” socialism, or “scientific” theories of race – than in all of the religious wars spanning the course of history combined.

The idea that atheists can stop the Islamic advance could only make sense to a modern European.

You can't beat something with nothing. Atheism isn't a values system, but the negation of a values system.

Whatever you think of it, Islam is a fighting creed. (Though some would say it more resembles an ideology than a religion.) Adherents are oriented in the universe. They're given a mission (purpose) in life, and a vision of reward and punishment in the afterlife.

It's not immigration alone that's driving the Islamization of Europe. Europeans also are converting to Islam. Strangely, they seem not to find fulfillment in 4-day work weeks, soccer-mania, hedonist philosophies or the anemic version of Christianity prevalent in many parts of the continent.

Even some devout unbelievers are driven by self-interest to take religion seriously.

In October, 2005, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, archbishop of Genoa, returned from a trip to Cuba with startling news – “Fidel Castro is asking us (*the Catholic Church*) for help to combat the plague of abortion in Cuba.,” Bertone disclosed.

“The spread of abortion, as Fidel Castro emphasized, is among the causes of the country's demographic crisis,” the archbishop added. Cuba has the lowest birthrate in Latin America and the Caribbean, well below replacement level. And, no one is immigrating to the workers' tropical paradise.

So, where does Fidel turn to combat abortion and stop Cuba's demographic suicide? To an institution he proclaimed his mortal enemy after the 1959 revolution.

Here's another irony: As noted above, Michel Onfray, the archbishop of atheism, spoke at the 500-seat Alexis de Tocqueville auditorium.

De Tocqueville was a French aristocrat whose family was guillotined during the Reign of Terror. The non-hedonistic philosopher is best known for his seminal work “Democracy In America,” based on his travels here in the early 19<sup>th</sup>. century.

Though an agnostic, de Tocqueville was discerning. In describing America's uniqueness (which even then had set it on a

course that would make the 20<sup>th</sup> century the American century) de Tocqueville wrote:

“I sought for the key to the greatness and genius of America in harbors...; in her fertile fields and boundless forests; in her rich mines and vast world commerce, in her public school system and institutions of learning. I sought for it in her democratic Congress and matchless Constitution.

Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power.”

That’s what Europe has lost. That’s why Europe, as we know it, could disappear in this century. Hedonistic philosophies don’t fill empty cradles.

They’re not making Frenchmen like de Tocqueville anymore.

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