
Carl Anderson: Acceptance Speech at RFI's 2021 Defender of Religious Freedom Award Ceremony

Religious Freedom Institute

Carl A. Anderson, former Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus, delivered the following remarks on November 13, 2021 at a [ceremony](#) in Washington, D.C. in acceptance of RFI's 2021 Defender of Religious Freedom Award. A video of his remarks is available [here](#).

Thank you very much. This award—*Defender of Religious Freedom*—means a great deal to me—not so much as a recognition of what I have done, but because it comes from you whom I respect so much for what *you have done*. Tom Farr and his colleagues at the Religious Freedom Institute are true heroes in the cause of religious liberty. You have done so much to protect our liberty and that of others around the world. I am honored to be associated with you and that you should consider me a worthy colleague.

I am also so very grateful to my brother Knights of Columbus whose dedication and sacrifice to preserve religious liberty both here and abroad have been a true inspiration to me for many years. The Knights of Columbus has a long record of standing strong in defense of religious liberty whether in front of the firing squads of *federales* in Mexico or the burning crosses of the Ku Klux Klan. This tradition continues and has grown stronger in recent years. I am more proud than I can say to have worked along-side so many great and dedicated Catholic men.

Tonight, I would like to speak about the increasing threat to religious liberty in America and the challenge it presents to people of faith—especially those committed to protecting the free exercise of religion.

The threat is this: one side of today's cultural debate is increasingly influenced by a way of thinking that sees not just a very limited role for religious liberty but ultimately sees no room for the free exercise of religion.

My own thinking in the matter relies on the work of two great French Christians: the late Protestant moral philosopher Paul Ricoeur and the Catholic theologian Henri De Lubac.

Ricoeur is known to many for describing Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud as the “masters of suspicion.” Although these three thinkers were very different, Ricoeur argued that their view of religion was very similar. The “masters of suspicion” was his short-hand way of describing the way each of them attacked religion and especially how they attacked Christianity.^[1]

Each of the three maintained that the problem was not just that people have wrong ideas that should be corrected, but that people have an entirely wrong way of looking at reality that must be replaced. People have a “false consciousness”—a flawed understanding of the world around them that makes it impossible for them to do what is necessary to achieve a just society, human freedom and personal fulfillment.

Ricoeur says that Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, each in his own way, sought to destroy the illusions of what they considered to be a false consciousness: Marx in the area of politics and economy, Nietzsche in the context of morality and autonomy and Freud in science and psychoanalysis.

Each sought to destroy a false consciousness and wake up society to a new narrative of reality. And each considered religion and particularly, Christianity, to be the false narrative that must be rejected as the precondition to realizing a new society capable of achieving human happiness.

I think we are all familiar with Marx’s famous description of religion as “the opium of the people.” But what he says next is more important: “The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness.”^[ii]

Religious belief for Marx is the essential element of the “false” consciousness which prevents the liberation of society. And therefore, he insists that “the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism.”^[iii]

Nietzsche’s approach is similar. He calls Christianity a “slave religion” and says its celebration of the “poor in spirit” makes individual autonomy and freedom impossible. Only the death of God can make men and women truly free.

Freud is more complicated. But his approach is clear from the title of his best-known book on religion: *The Future of an Illusion*.^[iv]

The problem for Freud is not that religion is a bad idea, but that religion is tied in an inescapable way to mental illness. He writes:

“One might venture to regard obsessional neurosis as a pathological counterpart of the formation of a religion, and to describe that neurosis as an individual religiosity and *religion as a universal neurosis*.”^[v] (emphasis added)

As Ricoeur points out, for Freud, man is neurotic insofar as he is religious and religious insofar as he is neurotic.

Since I first wrote about this some years ago in my book, *A Civilization of Love*,^[vi] I am more convinced than ever that as our country’s public debates increasingly focus on which side may be, as the saying goes, “following the science,” Freud’s approach may be the most dangerous to religious liberty in America.

Freud’s attack comes under the guise of science. He appears to offer a “neutral” framework to undermine religion and religious morality. In the long run, I think his descriptions of religion as a

universal neurosis and religious believers as mentally ill are most dangerous for the protection of religious liberty.

But regardless of which of the three may be most influential, Ricoeur's point is that they continue to have a powerful influence because of the way they attacked religion. They are more than historical curiosities. Ricoeur called them the masters of suspicion. I think of them as the founding fathers of modern atheism.

To the extent one considers religion evil—to be something equivalent to addiction, slavery or mental illness, one is not inclined to give the exercise of religion a privileged place in law or society.

Instead, we would expect to see precisely what is happening—increasing pressure to minimize religious influence in society.

But in the future even a limited space for religion may be too generous.

In the worldviews of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud there is *no place* for religion because religion is a fundamental barrier to the realization of a just society (Marx), human freedom (Nietzsche) and human wellbeing (Freud).

Henri De Lubac reaches a similar conclusion in his intellectual history of atheism entitled, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*.^[vii] He writes, “atheism is, at the very root of it an antitheism.”^[viii]

You may judge for yourself the extent to which this type of thinking already has conditioned the intellectual culture of America's elite institutions of higher education—has seeped into the ground water of America's elite progressive power centers.

But it is wishful thinking to assume it is not influencing the thinking of future generations of lawyers, judges, and policy makers who are now studying at those institutions; and how they will someday regard religion, its value and its place within society.

This is changing the ground rules of the culture war in America and in the future it will do so in more explicit ways.

The embrace of atheism as a new civil religion is becoming more militant.

Consider Bernard-Henri Levy's recommendation in his book, *Left in Dark Times: A Stand Against the New Barbarism*. He insists that the only way forward for the political Left is “a methodical atheism” and a politics focused “to get rid not only of old beliefs, but of the belief in belief.”^[ix]

He argues for a politics based on the idea that heaven is “empty” and whatever “idols” remain in the old way of thinking must be smashed.^[x]

Nearly 30 years ago, Yale law professor Stephen Carter in, *The Culture of Disbelief*, described the way our law and politics increasingly trivialized religious devotion.^[xi]

We have moved beyond a culture of disbelief to *a new culture of anti-belief*.

This is what the new “culture war” is now about.

For some time now we have watched the emergence of a naked public square—watched as, in Levy’s phrase, the remaining “idols” of an empty heaven are being smashed.

Yet, culture, like nature, abhors a vacuum.

The naked public square cannot stay naked for very long. Someone always comes along with a new set of clothes—especially in the area of morality.

This is precisely the point for Ricoeur: the *complete* deconstruction of the old order is the prerequisite for achieving the new order of justice, freedom and human fulfillment.

Nietzsche writes this:

“Up to the present the assault against Christianity has not only been fainthearted, it has been wide of the mark. So long as Christian ethics are not felt to be a capital crime against life, their defenders will have the game in their hands. The problem of the ‘truth’ of Christianity—the existence of its God or the historicity of its legend ... is in itself a very subsidiary problem so long as the value of Christian ethics goes unquestioned.”[\[xii\]](#)

A false ethics must be entirely displaced once the false consciousness that sustains it is deconstructed.

But more than that.

The false ethics must be seen as not only false but also as evil—as hurtful and cruel—as a “crime against life.”

So, Nietzsche’s quote from more than a century ago, that Christian ethics is “a capital crime against life” is also one of the best descriptions of the tactics now being used in our current cultural debate to displace the traditional Christian ethics around life, marriage, family, and gender.

The implications of these tactics for the “free exercise of religion” are unavoidable.

Today, we are on very different cultural ground than were the framers of the First Amendment.

Whether the framers were Christians or Deists, they agreed on an essential point—there is an objective, transcendent reality. And they agreed that each individual has a responsibility to explore and discover the nature of this transcendent reality and to conform his or her life to that understanding.

They also agreed that this responsibility is so constitutive of what it means to be a free person that government should only have a very limited role in the matter.

For that reason, they gave us the language of “free exercise of religion.”

James Madison neatly summed up the idea when he wrote, “religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence.”[\[xiii\]](#)

The First Amendment’s guarantee of religion liberty *reflects and is grounded in a culture of belief*.

Today that culture of belief is under sustained attack.

Standing against the culture of belief that gave rise to our religious liberty protections is an emerging *culture of anti-belief*—that is to say, a secular, materialist culture that rejects notions of transcendence and considers the idea of transcendent reality to be dangerous.

In many ways this culture of anti-belief mimics the elements of religious belief—some have even suggested the idea of a “pseudo-religion” that rivals and seeks to replace traditional Christian belief in the cultural spaces once filled by our Judeo-Christian heritage.[\[xiv\]](#)

So, the question is in what way can liberty—and more specifically, religious liberty—be grounded in a culture of anti-belief?

Consider what Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote in the 1992 case, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”[\[xv\]](#)

We may agree or disagree with Justice Kennedy. But clearly Justice Kennedy is saying something different than James Madison. And that difference is increasingly reflected in our elite institutions.

The questions we need to ask are, “To what extent religion and religious belief are already regarded by those elites as nothing more than a personal narrative of “the mystery of human life”? and “To what extent can religious liberty survive in this cultural ground?”

In *Casey*, Justice Kennedy’s description of liberty was used to defend conduct that was consistent with his view of a constitutional right to abortion. But what do we think will be the outcome when an individual’s meaning of life narrative conflicts with another, perhaps more popular constitutional liberty? Or when that personal narrative is alleged to be the product of social privilege or mental illness? Or when that personal narrative does not “follow the science” but runs counter to it?

We don’t need a crystal ball to see where this is heading.

So, what is to be done?

First, there needs to be a public debate about the philosophical assumptions underlying our current cultural conflict, how those assumptions are marginalizing religion in our national life, and the extent to which those assumptions are influencing present legal thinking and policy making and may do so to even a greater extent in the future.

More of us need to speak up and challenge those assumptions.

Second, the great work accomplished by so many organizations represented here tonight must continue in our courts and legislatures. And there should be even greater cooperation among all those committed to the robust protection of our religious liberty.

The cultural conflict in which we are engaged is being played out in our courts and our legislatures, in our media and our schools, and increasingly in our economic, corporate and financial enterprises. We must continue to be vigilant in all these areas.

All this is necessary, but not sufficient.

This brings me to my third point: people of faith need to exercise their religious belief in more demonstrable ways.

Consider the Little Sisters of the Poor—their witness and their litigation before the Supreme Court.

They are true heroes.

Yet their heroism had nothing to do with the self-interested carving out of a legal exemption to create a safe space for their narrative on the meaning of life.

Attempts to characterize the Little Sisters in this way failed—they failed not so much because of the brilliance of the Little Sisters' rhetoric, but because of the brilliance of their lives dedicated to helping the poor and suffering.

I do not know if any of the Little Sisters have read what James Madison wrote about the First Amendment. But I can think of none better who are living lives dedicated to what he envisioned the role of religious liberty would mean in America—people of integrity living lives dedicated in an uncompromising way to the duty they believe they owe to their Creator and to their fellow citizens.

These are the lives that build a culture of belief. And more of us should follow their example.

People defend and protect what they value—that which brings value to their lives and to society.

Our ultimate—and I believe decisive—defense of religious liberty is to live our religious faith so that others can see its value—to demonstrate by our lives the reality of the transcendent and how that reality lifts-up the world around us and makes it a better place.

At the heart of religious liberty is something fundamental—the extent to which we live in a way that affirms, respects and communicates the transcendent dignity of every person. This is the ground in which religious liberty will flourish.

We must defend the spiritual character and transcendent dignity of each person. We must not allow any person to be reduced to the level of the material world.

Easy to say. But how to proceed?

Perhaps we should listen to the person who, more than any other in our lifetime, devoted her life to precisely this work.

Mother Teresa of the Missionaries of Charity gave us a simple formula:

“The fruit of faith is love,
the fruit of love is service,
the fruit of service is peace.”

How do we overcome the emerging culture of anti-belief?

Lives of faith, love, service and peace. This is a good place to start.

This is how we will build a new culture of belief—a culture that will cherish and sustain the free exercise of religion.

What means the most to me this evening, is to be here with you—Americans united together in the great cause which is America: the cause of liberty, and the first freedom that sustains it.

Again, thank you very much.

Endnotes:

[i] Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 33.

[ii] Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844).

[iii] *Ibid.*

[iv] Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1989).

[v] Ricoeur, *op.cit.*, p. 232.

[vi] Carl Anderson, *A Civilization of Love: What Every Catholic Can Do to Transform the World* (New York: Harper One, 2008), see ch. 2.

[vii] Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995).

[viii] *Ibid.*, p.45.

[ix] *Ibid.*, pp. 210-11.

[x] *Ibid.*, p. 213.

[xi] Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Harper Books, 1993).

[xii] De Lubac, *op.cit.*, p. 115.

[xiii] James Madison, “Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments.” Law.gmu.edu

[xiv] See, for example, Jose Gomez, “Reflections on the Church and America’s New Religions,” <https://archbishopgomez.org/blog/reflections-on-the-church-and-americas-new-religions> (11/8/21).

[xv] 505 U.S. 833; 112 S.Ct. 2791; 120 L.Ed.2d 674 (1992).



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