



Religion in America: a Political History

Denis Lacorne

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BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

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A Conversation with Denis Lacorne, Author of *Religion in America*

INTERVIEW BY ERIK OWENS
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OWENS: One of the fundamental premises in your book rests upon the idea that American national identity followed the establishment of its political institutions, as opposed to preceding them. You quote historian John Murrin about how our constitutional roof was built before our national walls. Could you elaborate a bit on that?

LACORNE: It's striking that, when it comes to Europe, the nation comes into existence at the same time as the state.. Usually the political regime coincides with the building of a nation (with the exception of course of Germany and Italy) In the United States, there is really a disconnect between the two. That's what I find fascinating in the American experience. Hence the validity of John Murrin's expression.

Of course it took over a century—and a civil war—to solidify the nation. It could have happened in Europe had, say, the revolutions of 1848 triumphed throughout Europe. You would have had political institutions first and then a new kind of Republic and a new type of nation in Germany, Italy, and so on and so forth. But it didn't quite happen that way and certainly not in the case of France, Britain or Spain.

OWENS: This highlights the importance of national narratives, of how we talk about ourselves. What narratives do you most often see in American stories about ourselves? How do they compare to the French understandings of America?

LACORNE: When I'm talking about narratives of identity-building, what I mean is narratives that are developed by political elites, historians and intellectuals. It's not necessarily a popular or widely accepted narrative. But I think elites matter and historians matter, particularly in the way they write or rewrite or reinvent a creation story. In the American creation story, the Founding Fathers are key,

along with the Declaration of Independence, the *Federalist Papers*, the Constitution. Those are the key instruments that are still a source of the American civic culture.. It's fascinating that in Washington, DC, when you visit the National Archives, on Constitution street, you find the original draft of the Constitution preserved like Lenin's corpse used to be preserved in the Kremlin. The case is bluish and greenish because it's such a thick glass, designed to resist a nuclear explosion. It's an important document to protect, but the result is that it's very hard to read the original text because of this greenish glass. But very few societies have such a strong sense of their political creation and such a strong attachment to a single founding document. The constant references to the Founding Fathers are striking and it is remarkable that this continues up to this day.

Then you have this other creation story, this other narrative, which interestingly enough doesn't respect the historical time frame. This narrative was developed in the 19th century in reaction to the failure of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution at a time when romantic imagination gave tremendous importance to emotions, religious ideas, and the rediscovery of ancient peoples. If you look at 19th century writers, Whig historians or New England historians for that matter, what they are fascinated with are creation stories, the "character" of the people, the "volkgeist" or the spirit of a nation—a spirit that you find in some ancient people building up a nation. The model is of course Tacitus, who wrote about the Germanic tribes, which were then glorified by Herder, the Schlegel Brothers or Fichte. And you have this rediscovery of the Gauls in France, of the Saxons in Britain, who are supposed to be more attached to liberty than the Norman invaders....

If you transfer that kind of romantic imagination to the United States, and if you bracket the American Indians and also the first settlers—who happened not to be Puritans but adventurers who went to Virginia and had no particular religious motivation—you are left with the Puritans. Hence this rewrite of American history slightly displaces references to the Founding Fathers—although it does not necessarily eliminate them. It places a tremendous emphasis on the Pilgrims and the Puritans. This happens particularly in New England, with people like John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster, and George Bancroft. I think Bancroft is the first major historian of the United States, the American equivalent of Michelet, the French historian of the French revolution. By the way, the first volume of Bancroft's *History of the United States* was published in 1834, one year before Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. I find a lot of affinities between Bancroft and Tocqueville, as if they had read each other's work. Although Tocqueville never refers to Bancroft in his *Democracy in America*, he clearly knew the great American historian and in fact did correspond with him later in his life. There is also William Robertson, a very interesting scholar from Britain, a typical product of the Scottish Enlightenment, the author of the *History of America* (1777, updated in 1828 in a posthumous edition). Robertson is a transition personality who disliked the Puritans and thought they were fanatics, but who claimed nevertheless, that they brought a decisive "spirit", a unique Puritan ethic, strongly influenced by the democratic tradition of the Levelers. Robertson anticipates Bancroft and Max Weber. He should be reread and rediscovered.

I'm also interested in the way the French discuss or look at those narratives of identity formation. What's fascinating for me is Enlightenment philosophers like Voltaire, but also Locke at the end of the 17th century. Locke in his *Letter Concerning Toleration* is critical of the excesses of Calvinism and denounces the burning of Michel Servet in Geneva. Voltaire and many other Enlightenment philosophers and the anonymous author of the article "Puritan" in Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, have a very negative view of Puritanism in general and especially New England Puritans. The latter are described as fanatic, as archaic, as intolerant. In no way are they role models. On the other hand, in Voltaire's *Philosophical Letters*, there is a tremendous admiration for the Quakers of Pennsylvania because the French philosopher sees in Quakerism an ideal type, a perfect anti-Catholicism. He sees the Quakers as the ideal religion for a non-religious age -- a religion without sacraments or communion-- and he praises William Penn for having created a "government without priests". This is a good example of 18th century French thinking applied to America.

Also later, visitors from France like Chateaubriand express a very negative view of the Puritans. For that matter, if you look at the Founding Fathers, what do they say about the New England experience? What do they say about the Puritans? Nothing. In the *Federalist Papers*, you don't find a single reference to either New Jerusalem or the Puritan experience. For them, it's a distant past that doesn't really matter anymore when they write at the end of the 18th century. Thomas Paine is much more relevant than Winthrop.

OWENS: You mentioned that you think elite opinion matters in shaping these narratives, and yet there's a disjunction at times between the elites' crafting of narratives and the actual realities that they are describing, because they are employed in the service of nation-building of some sort. Could you say a bit about the sort of challenges that arise to these narratives (of secularism or homogeneity, for example) over time?

LACORNE: In looking at the transatlantic trade of republican ideas, there is a fascination in France for what will become known as the separation of church and state, and the United States is clearly ahead of France on this. There is a fascination with Jefferson's Bill for establishing religious freedom in Virginia, which passes thanks to Madison's lobbying. In fact, that bill was fully translated and publicized in France in 1786, three years before the Revolution, by Dèmeunier, who was a lawyer and the editor-in-chief of a new post-Diderot encyclopedia, the *Encyclopédie Méthodique*. Dèmeunier's Encyclopedia had 14 chapters dedicated to the United States alone and a long section on the Virginia debate on religious freedom and the disestablishment of the Anglican Church in the state of Virginia. So we learn about the separation of church and state even before it is discussed in France, three years before the French Revolution. That's very important, and of course Jefferson was quite influential: he had just been appointed ambassador to

the Court of Versailles (to be exact he was “Minister Plenipotentiary” to the Court of Versailles)

To answer your question of whether there is a gap between the elite and the people. I answer yes, in the sense that Jefferson and most, if not all, of the Founding Fathers are deists. The average American is probably not deist or an agnostic at the time, and will be less and less sympathetic with deism with the rise of the Second Great Revival. Jefferson is the author of the so-called “Jefferson Bible,” which takes away everything that has to do with miracles and the Resurrection.

. That’s not what the typical American would do, but that doesn’t mean that Jefferson himself is anti-religious or that a secular person is necessarily anti-religious. Jefferson and Madison, in their fight against the Anglican Church in Virginia, are in fact representing or defending smaller churches, like Baptist churches, against an overpowering established church.

So there is in the narrative of secularism a notion of pluralism as well, and that’s evident in the *Federalist*, when Madison is talking about political factions and compares them to religious sects. In fact, he gives almost a direct quote from Voltaire: You don’t want only one church because then you have tyranny; nor do you want two churches, because you may end up with a civil war; but you want 30 or 50 churches. That’s something that is also in Plutarch and other authors as well: the idea that religious pluralism is perfectly compatible with secularism. Secularism is all about state neutrality, separation of church and state, but certainly not about the disappearance or the destruction of churches. One should avoid that confusion.

OWENS: Yet there is an intertwining of these narratives, of course, and somehow they are competing. Could you talk about what you see in the contemporary scene, how the narratives are referenced today in the 21st century?

LACORNE: There are many ways to look at it, but my claim is that the Enlightenment or secular narrative is probably best understood and defended by judges, federal judges and justices of the U.S. Supreme Court. That starts with a key decision, the *Everson* decision of 1947, where Jefferson is being rediscovered. Today, you still have a number of justices like Souter or Ginsburg or Breyer who believe in a separation of church and state and insist that, in the public space in the United States, you cannot have a nativity scene or tablets with the 10 Commandments, or prayer in school because that’s not compatible with the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

Then on the other side, and more in line with the New Puritan romantic narrative, there are very conservative justices like Rehnquist for instance, or today Thomas and Scalia, who do not believe in the separation of church and state and who would like to abolish it. They object to Jefferson’s notion of a “wall of separation

between church and state”. They think it is the “wrong metaphor”—that’s a quote from Rehnquist—and are very much opposed to that.

To further complicate the debate, besides separatists and anti-separatists, you have the accommodationists who in fact claim that there are circumstances where you can indeed have nativity scenes in the public space or the 10 Commandments in the public space, provided that it is next to other religious and secular symbols. If you have a Jewish Menorah next to a Christmas tree, then that’s fine. If you have a nativity scene and an elephant and a clown, that passes muster because it’s not just defending one church or the Christian tradition. Surprisingly, if you look at France—which is supposed to be the land of strict, rigid separation of church and state—there are a lot of accommodationists as well. One could illustrate this in looking at the way we created the French *laïcité*, but maybe that’s a different topic.

OWENS: What are the particular benefits and drawbacks of being a foreigner speaking about America? There is a long and distinguished history of French observers writing about the US; what does being a part of that tradition mean to your own scholarship?

LACORNE: I come from a secular society, but one which still has the reflexes of a Catholic country and where the Catholic culture remains very strong, even though the practice is very low. Paradoxically, it seems to me that 18th century Frenchmen and Americans understood each other better than 21st century Frenchmen and Americans, despite the proximity and despite the fact that we often travel to the United States. The most striking thing for me is not so much the agreements or disagreements on secularism. I think we both understand what it means; we both understand what separation of church and state means and state neutrality. In this domain, the two societies are very much alike.

But if you move towards the mid 19th-century—when evangelicalism becomes predominant—the French don’t understand it. Even Tocqueville doesn’t understand it. Paradoxically, Tocqueville locates the point of departure of American democracy in New England with the Puritans—although it’s an abstract conception of the Puritans—but when he visits camp meetings in the 1830s, he is horrified and he writes about evangelical sects the way Fanny Trollope writes about them, which I find very surprising.

That misunderstanding of evangelicalism still continues today. When a French journalist is repelled by all the references to religion in American political discourse, he or she blames it on the Puritans! The tendency is to say, *oh, well, they’re Puritan, they’ve always been Puritan*, and that explains the strangeness of US politics. There is a complete lack of understanding of the complexity of religion in America and of religious pluralism and also a complete lack of understanding of the complexity of American politics, where not everyone is a member of the Christian Right or a Fundamentalist.

So you have strange writings coming out of France. Typical stereotypes: When Jean-Paul Sartre and later when Simone de Beauvoir travel to the United States right after the Second World War, they are absolutely convinced that they see Puritans all over the place, even among students—to the point of claiming that they behave puritanically in the sexual act. More recently, Bernard-Henri Levy displayed the same stereotypical conception. Retracing Tocqueville's travel in *American Vertigo* (published in 2006), he visits a bordello in Nevada (which is not exactly what Tocqueville would have done!) and opines that he is witnessing Puritanism at work.

So today we have this interesting debate between Rick Perry and Mitt Romney about the Mormon church that adds confusion to confusion, because we know nothing about Mormonism in France and it appears to be a very bizarre religion. Again, we are going to claim that Americans are crazy when in fact they're not; it's religious pluralism at its best and at its worst. It's true that there is a kind of underground religious war in American primaries, but this may have to do with the calendar of the primaries and caucuses. Iowa and South Carolina are two states where the evangelical vote matters a great deal. Six months from now, we may not talk about religion any more. In France we're having a first experience with primaries. The Socialist party is the first French party which has opted for a primary system to nominate its presidential candidate. But it is a very different system: a national primary with a short two week campaign: not enough time to talk about secularism or religious issues....

OWENS: So are we so different, the French and Americans?

LACORNE: Yes and no. I would say, in many ways, you may be more strictly separatists than we are. A very simple example is that it's true that we French do not ban the cross or tablets of the 10 Commandments in the public space and how could we? The public space is so colonized by religious symbols and structures that have been present as far back as the Middle Ages that it would be absurd and counterproductive to ban crosses or religious monuments from the French public square. But we do ban the veil and we do ban the burqa. We do it when we face unfamiliar religions and practices that are disturbing for some of us. But in many ways you Americans are more separatist than we are, in the sense that you do not finance private religious schools with the limited exception of vouchers. We do. Since 1959, up to 80% of the cost of a religious education in France is supported by the state. So in many ways, there is more entanglement of church and state in France than in the United States, if you consider the question of education and private schools.

OWENS: Thank you very much.

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