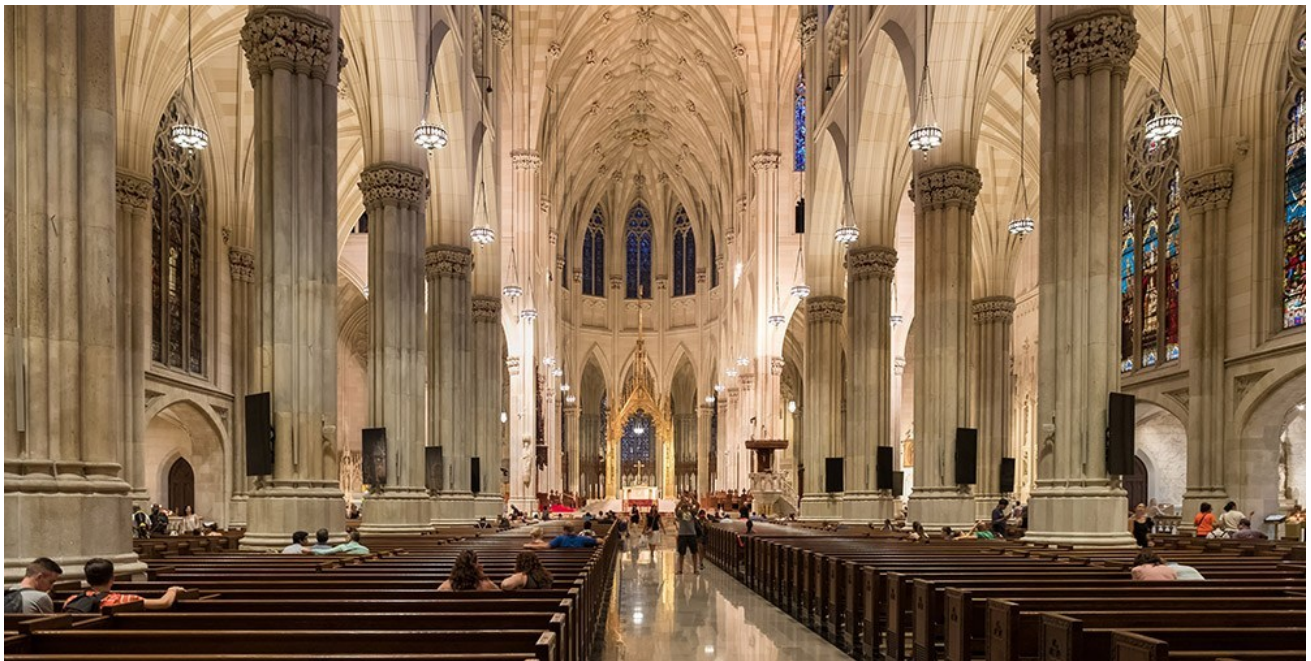


# How COVID-19 Plagues Religious Freedom

This is a brave new world for the uncontrolled and inexplicably self-confident forces of belligerent American secularism.

by Conrad Black



As the coronavirus crisis unfolds and the 2016 election and post-electoral scandals ooze into the open, God is affronted and false gods disintegrate. The discussion over the opening of churches is generally presented as a public health issue, coupled with a First Amendment freedom of religion argument. But, in many cases, it is an outright assault on the practice of religion generally.

Compared to other advanced Western democracies, the United States is a country that practices religion. But the media, academia, and conventional wisdom embedded in the contemporary ethos of America's governing elites is, estimating very roughly, one-quarter religious communicants or sympathizers, one-quarter agnostic, one-quarter atheist, and one-quarter

anti-theist. All of these groups, of course, are entitled to have and to express their opinions—but they are not entitled to impose their opinions on others.

## **What Is “Essential”?**

At the beginning of the coronavirus national shutdown in March, an argument was made that as religious congregations are frequently quite large and generally the congregants are physically close together, there was a legitimate public health claim to suspend services in all houses of worship. This was a legally vulnerable endeavor from the beginning because of the First Amendment prohibition on infringement of free exercise of religion, and because the criterion for essential services was arbitrarily decided by secular leaders.

Liquor stores and gun stores were deemed to be essential even though houses of worship, judged to be essential by a large part of the population, were not so deemed by officials. Practically all of the religious denominations gamely went along in the time of crisis and offered virtual services over the internet.

But as data accumulated revealing that the risk of this virus was minimal to all but those with challenged immune systems, especially the elderly, it was clear that religious congregations, composed almost entirely of relatively purposeful and responsible people, would only pose a hazard to elderly congregants, and that these could normally be relied upon to be prudent about their own health and in any case to take responsibility for their own actions.

There was thus no public health reason to attempt to continue the ban on religious services after it became clear that such measures were unnecessarily restrictive. The United States reached this point of public awareness by the middle of April and what has happened since has been harassment of religious

practice by secular authorities masquerading as defenders of public health.

## **Our Anti-Theist Elites**

It is impossible to be precise about the motives of individual governors and mayors diligently hiding behind masks of concern for public health. But it safely may be assumed that in some cases—such as the egregious Democratic governor of Virginia, Ralph Northam, who advocates infanticide and a semi-permanent lockdown—that a dislike for any acknowledgment of the possible existence of a divine intelligence or any spiritual forces active in human life partially informs the authoritarian regime he has inflicted upon his fellow Virginians.

Though most of the influential founders of the institutions of American government were not diligent adherents to particular religious sects and had a somewhat “Age of Reason” perspective, they were concerned in the First Amendment to assure that one religious group did not oppress other religious groups. This was the burden of President Washington’s famous addresses to the [Roman Catholics](#) of Maryland and to the congregation of the [Newport synagogue](#), that whatever oppressions they or their ancestors faced in the old world would not be replicated in the United States of America.

In general, the United States has been faithful to Washington’s pledge and it would be an exaggeration to imply that it has departed from it in the last couple of months. But what American society is facing now was an unforeseen problem: today the anti-theists, a coalition of materialists, pagans,

and both world-weary and militant cynics is tentatively seeking to suppress the practice of or indulgence of any religion. The United States has been a tolerant rather than a pious country, and this is what is under threat.

Jefferson was a deist of very diluted faith in anything other than the wonders of the world. Franklin was more or less of a good-humored agnostic. Though his funeral train in 1790 was followed by every clergyman in Philadelphia, he did not have a religious funeral. Even the much-celebrated but rather desiccated Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes apologetically stated that he was a Unitarian because in the Boston of his youth, "You had to be something religiously, and Unitarian was the least you could be."

Of course, Jefferson, Franklin, and Holmes did not try to prevent those who wished to practice a religion from doing so. This is a brave new world for the uncontrolled and inexplicably self-confident forces of belligerent American secularism.

## **The Gods That Failed**

There is no acceptable argument for seeking to prevent people from practicing a religion. It is an impulse that man has had since his earliest days, and is prompted by an awareness of the inability of the human mind to grasp the notions of how things began and what their physical and temporal extent might be, and how miraculous events and spiritual insights can be assimilated into any concept of cosmic order.

There is the further complication that once any notion of supernatural, otherworldly, spiritual, or miraculous forces are dispensed with, a vacuum is created which is filled at best by vacuous imposters but more often and more infamously by people elevating themselves to the stature of gods and

celebrating themselves in impressive but often repulsive pagan festivals. This tradition can be traced from the mists of antiquity to giants of classical history such as Alexander the Great and Julius and Augustus Caesar who raised themselves to the status of gods. Their festivals were replicated by Robespierre, Hitler, and Stalin, but modern anti-theistic self-elevated deities have naturally magnified the oppressions of the ancient world with the application of what Winston Churchill described, in reference to the Third Reich as tyranny "made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science."

Even an absurd state governor like Northam is not in any sense reminiscent of any of the individuals just mentioned. But if the militant atheists of the American media-academic complex who have practically taken over the Democratic Party are any more overt in their ambitions, they will be confronted by the great majority of Americans who either practice a religion or acknowledge that people have a right to do so.

Those who aggressively despise religion in America are going to have to resign themselves to its imperishability or erupt from their fetid closet and acknowledge what their true aims are, and take their chances with the pluralistic system that they have deviously attempted to manipulate.

As this subplot unfolds, America's most recent secular demigod, Barack Obama, is every day exposed as an empty legend crumbling into sawdust. He is not the idealist hailed in 2008 seeking American brotherhood and a Socratic state with less materialism and greater intellectual elevation. He is a failed and corrupt president whose principal achievements were a thoroughly inadequate reform to the healthcare system, insane and unconstitutional commitment to ecological fantasies, and an almost catastrophic attempt to appease America's enemies, particularly the demented theocracy of Iran.

As false gods fail, the believers in a real God persevere.

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