

Religious fanaticism still defies the Secular State.
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While stupid killers around the world go on their endless rounds of murdering people in the name of their medieval religion, others are engaged in the great human enterprise (such as the Pluto flyby) of exploring space.

An international coalition of astronomers is building the largest telescope in the world at the summit of a "sacred" Hawaiian mountain, Mauna Kea. When completed, this 98-foot-aperture telescope will permit more than nine-times the collecting area of the largest current optical telescopes and will be 12-times sharper in resolution than the Hubble Space Telescope. This is a huge deal for astronomers, who have been exploring the universe since Galileo's first telescope in the 16th century told mankind that, contrary to what religion insisted, earth was not the center of the universe.

This Hawaiian project is important because only a few places on earth are remote, dark, and safe enough for such a structure. The altitude of the mountain (13,796 feet), its dry environment, and stable airflow are perfect.

Now, suddenly, a group of protestors has blocked the road to the mountain summit to construction teams and visitors, claiming that the ground is sacred to native Hawaiians! "It is where we come from. The top of the mountain is where the gods reside. It's the highest level of Hawaiian spirituality," said Dawn Keniapiro, a documentary film-maker and activist.

I am not impressed, particularly when I learn that this project was eight years in the making, with endless negotiations among all the stakeholders, including scientific organizations from Canada, Japan, China, and all the local communities: the Hawaiian governor, the University of Hawaii, the Department of Land and Natural Resources, and Department of Public Safety. The "activists" sounds suspiciously like a group looking for extortion money that could bankroll a documentary film, among other things.

Undue sympathy for religious views needs to be addressed here. Where does one draw the line in a modern society? This has been an issue from the beginning of America's existence, but we do not find all religious notions equal.

There is no established American church, which means no particular sect is officially sanctioned by the federal government. All religions are free to practice without interference, but with certain exceptions: no Mormon or Muslim polygamy, no voodoo sacrifice of animals, no Muslim honor killing or female genital mutilation, and no Christian Science denial of lifesaving medicine for children.

In the Hawaiian case, the demonstrators will lose. This is pure opportunism. Why didn't the gods object over the many prior telescopes on that mountain? We see many cases of this sort of obstruction throughout the United States, 11th hour attempts to stop any sort of project well after exhaustive deliberations by people who just do not want change. In this case, it is the claim that their ancestors came out of the volcano when there is more than enough evidence that their origins were the far more heroic tale of seagoing Polynesian adventures from far away Asia.

Closer to home, a Kentucky county clerk (who issues wedding licenses) has refused to do the work she is paid to do by denying marriage licenses to same-sex couples. It is against her religious beliefs, she says. Happily, a judge disagreed and jailed her. If her conscience is so important, she should resign from her job.

This woman's lawyer claimed that firing such a woman because of her religious beliefs is the same thing as when the Nazis fired all Jews from official posts. This is an amazing piece of chop-logic! Jews were fired for being Jews. This woman cannot even be fired because she is an elected official. She is being jailed because she disobeyed a court order. Her job requires compliance. Her religion is not being persecuted.

The same issue has turned up with Muslim taxi drivers in the Minneapolis Airport who refused to take passengers carrying wine bottles or those with seeing-eye dogs. Also, a Muslim flight attendant refuses to serve alcohol. Their options are to surrender their licenses and jobs or obey the law. The Kentucky registrar is in good company with these Muslim scofflaws.

684 words

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