

The Quintessential Secular Institution

Frank L. Pasquale

I f you were asked to identify the most pervasive and influential secular institution in human affairs, what would you say? I suspect that most would reflexively think of civil government, but I don't think that is the right answer. Governments, after all, range from substantially secular to theocratic with many gradations in between. Even in the United States, there is continual reference—symbolic and substantive—to religion (overwhelmingly Christianity) in the halls of government. A better answer, I think, is the for-profit corporation, which may well be the quintessential secular institution. All the more paradoxical, then, that so many secularists hold an almost reflexively negative view of “the corporation.”

There is a notable streak of anti-corporatism among secularists. This was drawn to my attention most forcefully by a series of lectures that at a local secular humanist organization in which the (multinational) corporation was virtually demonized. Interestingly, these lectures were delivered—to consistently rave reviews—by a retired (but still quite Lutheran) chaplain. While the overwhelmingly atheistic and skeptical audience and he lay on opposite ends of the metaphysical spectrum, the audience's approving responses and enthusiastic applause indicated that he and they shared substantially similar political views. Among these views were that corporations are the root of many of our (and the world's) social and economic problems. The corporation does not deserve legal status as a person. Multinational corporations rape, pillage, and plunder the land, labor, and resources of the poor in third-world countries. They wield too much power. And so on.

There are, no doubt, merits to these and other critiques of both capitalism and corporations. But the posture in these lectures tended toward a Manichaeian opposition of virtuous liberalism (religious or secular) versus (if you'll pardon the term) evil incorporated. This was more than enough to perplex a young first-time visitor to the

group who, following one of these lectures, reported that he owns his own corporation and wondered whether such views were a fair reflection of group members' attitudes. Several members indicated that, by and large, they were. He expressed dismay at what he viewed as one-sided overgeneralization, particularly in a group that espoused reason and critical thinking, and never returned.

There is a curious irony about this posture, since for-profit corporations are arguably the most pervasively secular of all human institutions. Leaving aside the rare company that makes direct reference to religious ideas or identities (such as ServiceMaster, whose corporate policy reflects founder Marion E. Wade's commitment to “honor God in all we do”), and allowing for religious employee associations in some companies (alongside bowling groups or other voluntary employee interest groups), most corporations are overwhelmingly religion-free zones devoted to decidedly this-worldly pursuits. Most employees fulfill their duties as employees without reference to their metaphysical views. Religion is a personal matter substantially left outside the office.

The corporation can, in fact, be viewed as the institutional embodiment of both individualism and secularization. (One of the few schools of thought to explicitly celebrate this observation is the Objectivism of Ayn Rand.) The corporation reflects the gradual ascendance of manufacturers and merchants over churchmen, princes, peasants, or soldiers as the prime movers of society. It represents the aggregate power of individuals acting as creative and autonomous bargainers in the marketplace for their time, skills, labor, services, and goods—with no reference to gods, ghosts, or supernatural sanctions.

So why do so many secularists unleash nearly as much opprobrium about “the corporation” as they do about “religion”?

One possible answer is that secularists tend to be reflexively anti-institutional. They exhibit a strong individualistic and autonomous streak that prompts suspicion toward aggregate human behavior of any kind—particularly large-scale aggregate behavior. One problem with this, however, is that those who tend to be the most corporate-critical also tend to be the most supportive of active and interventionist (secular) government, arguably the ultimate form of aggregate human behavior. On their view, corporations cannot be allowed to exercise their power unchecked, and the only institution sufficiently powerful to act as a meaningful check—by exerting policing authority—upon them is a government backed by “the will of the people.”

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Another somewhat ironic, but more compelling, explanation is suggested by the tone and content of much secularist discussion about corporations and capitalism. Many politically liberal secularists are critical of “the corporation” because they object to the “greedy,” “materialistic,” and excessively self-interested motives and behavior exhibited by “some” (or “too many” or “most”) companies, their governing boards, and their top

executives. The malfeasance of Enron, obscene profits of Exxon, and monopolistic machinations of Microsoft are familiar fodder. Yet it is notable that corporations exhibit many of the very characteristics that secularists explicitly desire in society at large.

The global corporate arena represents one of the most pervasive, and pluralistic, secular social and institutional systems in human affairs. Individuals of many cultures, ethnicities, philosophies, colors, and creeds spend the better part of their waking hours collaborating productively on shared aims and activities within corporations. There are both tacit and explicit rules of proper conduct and of professional ethics, some reinforced by law. Corporations substantially operate in a legally and ethically—if unapologetically competitive, self-interested, and materialistic—manner.

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In many respects, in fact, this is precisely the kind of society that secularists seem to seek—a pluralistic context in which individuals may conduct their affairs with minimal intrusion or constraint from government or neighbor (apart from limits that are reasonably imposed by law), with little or no reference to supernatural ideas (or transcendental authority for one’s activities or decisions), no fixed doctrine or creed, emphasis on reasoned and evidence-based decision-making, and a purposive focus on decidedly this-worldly pursuits and physical well-being.

But when they look at the moral or ethical ethos of corporate capitalism, many

politically liberal secularists do not like what they see. The mandate for this-worldly success in the marketplace too often pushes companies, their governors, or their employees to test the limits of “reasonable” codes of conduct, professional ethics, or even the law. All too often, they fail to live up to secularists’ expectations for ethical and social responsibility. Selfish self-interest too often overcomes enlightened self-interest, to say nothing of reasonable regard for others, the commonweal, or the planet. Ironically, it is this very tendency that religious conservatives attribute (rightly or wrongly) to “secular liberals” and the kind of society they espouse—diverse individuals freely engaging in this-worldly interests and pursuits unencumbered by religion and constrained by moral or legal codes only as much as is necessary to prevent overt harm to others or anarchic chaos.

Another irony is that it is religious political conservatives, in the United States at least, who are among the most active apologists for free-market capitalism and the unfettered corporation. They do so with the stipulation that widespread religious (read: Christian) commitment should provide both personal and external moral/ethical restraints on the behavior of participants, even as they conduct their everyday affairs in the secular world of the corporation. This reflects what may be called the “Adam Smith model,” in which the *homo economicus* of *The Wealth of Nations* is balanced or restrained by the *homo “ethicus”* of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The unfetteredly competitive, self-interested (but optimally responsible or enlightened) exchange of goods and services in the marketplace is thought to be balanced or restrained by a natural moral force (which Smith calls “sympathy”) that is embedded in the species but strengthened by religion.

American religious conservatives have faith in an invisible hand operating in the corporate arena—as long as this is bolstered by religious reinforcement of moral sentiments and sanctions in the hearts and minds (or souls and consciences) of all participants. Secular liberals, absent suffi-

cient faith in an ethical or economic invisible hand (or any faith in religion), grapple with what they view as ethically objectionable outcomes of the most secular of human institutions. Of necessity, they turn to the only other institution with sufficient countervailing power to keep corporations within ethically acceptable bounds—civil government.

It is by consent, compromise, and social contract that autonomous individuals amass and confer power to institutions—governments—with sufficient force to check the natural excesses of economic self-interest in the marketplace (and the corporation). These, of course, must be secular so that no citizen is disenfranchised or marginalized on the basis of religious creed or lack thereof. On these points, liberal religionists and irreligionists are substantially agreed.

So it is that secular humanist audience members are led by a politically liberal Lutheran chaplain in a chorus critical of the most pervasive secular institutions (corporations) that embody many of the characteristics they seek in society at large. Meanwhile, the choral director subtly but unmistakably suggests that religion is needed to reinforce ethical behavior in both the corporate arena and the secular society espoused by members of the chorus. Group members graciously overlook the good chaplain’s “misguided” religiosity while joining him in demonizing the corporation and calling for government regulation to rein in its objectionably self-interested tendencies.

Perhaps the greatest irony is that the corporation is rarely, if ever, recognized, explored, or celebrated by secular intellectuals as, quite possibly, the most impactful and quintessentially secular institutional form in human affairs. Might it be that the excesses to which corporations are prone cut too close to home—underscoring the challenges of checking individual and institutional self-interest in the secular pursuit of this-worldly rewards? 

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