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Humanist Scholarship Application

Religion tangled up with law is being used as a weapon against individuals because of their gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. What can/should be done to ensure that our laws and their application are free from such bias?

It is impossible to discuss the current climate of the judicial system and the eroding rights of immigrants, people of color, women, and the LGBTQ community without discussing the Trump administration and its policies. Donald Trump's presidential election in 2016 was partly due to the overwhelming support of white evangelical Christians (the Pew Research Center puts the number at 81 percent). This group has remained his strongest base and he has fulfilled his campaign promises to them, from attempting to limit--or outright ban--abortion to blocking transgender people from serving in the military to drastically reducing immigration. The symbiotic relationship between evangelicals and Trump has leaders of the National Association of Evangelicals boasting about their "unprecedented access to the president" and Jerry Falwell Jr. calling him their "dream president." There is no doubt that this close relationship has affected recent policy changes. To reverse these efforts and lead the US back to the ideals of human dignity, compassion, and equality for all people, we need to identify religious bias, disseminate accurate information, educate the public, and ensure representation in our leaders.

The first step to understanding how religion is creeping into our governmental policies is identifying it. In today's age of labeling things "fake" that are not favorable to one's own opinion, the role of nonpartisan watchdogs is critical. Americans United for Separation of Church and State (AU) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) are two such groups who fight to defend constitutional rights. Since Trump was elected, the ACLU alone has brought

hundreds of legal actions against his administration and other government agencies, including: fighting for the rights of DACA recipients; challenging the Muslim ban; supporting the rights of sanctuary cities; blocking the transgender military ban; blocking the “bathroom bill”; preventing new restrictions on abortion rights; and fighting to prevent employers from excluding birth control under their health plans. The ACLU and AU have millions of members between them and thus have the resources necessary to find and respond to prejudicial Christian morality masquerading as prudent public policy.

After identifying religious influence, the next step is to disseminate accurate and fact-based information to the public. The majority of Americans used to get their news from shared sources such as regional newspapers and network news; however, in the digital age, the number of sources has skyrocketed and more people get their news from sources that speak to their already-held opinions. An eye-opening chart published by Vanessa Otero (mediabiaschart.com) shows the most popular news sources, what types of reporting they conduct, and their degree of partisanship and bias. According to her data, the most conservative-biased sources are InfoWars and Breitbart. These outlets are labeled as containing inaccurate and fabricated information and are included in a group of sources noted as being “nonsense damaging to public discourse.” To combat false and misleading information about government and politics, it is important to get real news and analysis from truthful and non-skewed sources.

Another tool to ensure secular public policy is to have a strong public education system. One of the stated goals of the Trump administration is to provide vouchers for religious education. Studies show the detrimental effects such a system has on public education by taking

tax dollars from public classrooms, creating unequal standards, and leaving behind students with disabilities or those who need extra help such as English language learners. By its nature, religious training and education do not emphasize critical-thinking skills or science-based learning. In many fundamentalist Christian schools, the opposite is true and widely-recognized theories such as the Big Bang and evolution are either ignored or said to be false. According to Scientific American, white evangelicals are more likely to say humans have always existed in their present form (“creationism”) than other Christians, Catholics, or non-religiously-affiliated adults. It is plausible that children educated in religious schools are less likely to apply reason and critical thinking to public policy and will look to their religious leaders for guidance. Rather than spend our collective money to support religious schools, we should strengthen public education programs that emphasize critical thinking which leads to increased political and media literacy.

Finally, we can help remove religious influence from public policies by ensuring representation in our leaders. It is imperative that various perspectives and experiences shape the policies that affect us all, from local school boards and city councils to state and federal legislatures and wide-ranging judicial positions. One of the most striking statistics of the Trump administration is the lack of racial diversity in his cabinet members. According to Univision, when he took office, Trump’s cabinet was 86.4 percent white compared to the general population of 61.5 percent white. Since then, his cabinet has become even more white and male. The statistics for the judiciary are just as homogeneous: Newsweek reports that 85 percent of Trump nominees are white and 76 percent are men, and the two Supreme Court justices he nominated and confirmed are both white males. Judges directly impact what cases are heard and how they

are adjudicated, so a lack of diversity of race and gender, much less intersectional representation is appalling. A concentrated effort to correct this situation is paramount to any future hope of non-biased policies that include all citizens regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or religious (and non-religious) affiliation.

Many of the policies enacted or proposed by the Trump administration are in direct opposition to non-religious or equality-minded people. Supporting organizations that bring discriminatory practices to light, such as AU and the ACLU, and engaging with fair and truthful news sources that inform the citizenry is something we can all do. On top of this, we can vote. Voting for leaders from different backgrounds and experiences--and those that are committed to keeping personal religious beliefs out of public policy--will protect our education system, our judicial system, our health care system, and all other areas that make up our shared lives as Americans.