

# DEFENDING THE SECULAR STATE

by Carlene Cross

EDITOR'S NOTE: As a refugee from the Religious Right, Carlene Cross looks back on the upbringing and the education that led her to marry a man who became a minister in a religiously conservative, fundamentalist church. Daring and controversial, her memoir



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*Fleeing Fundamentalism*

In 1980, a passionate preacher named Jerry Falwell began a campaign of repentance, pro-

claiming that America had

turned its back on God by abandoning the beliefs upon which Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin had founded it. His "I Love America" crusade insisted that Christians become involved in the political process and succeeded in registering thousands of supporters, spawning the Moral Majority movement. Thus the newfangled concept of Christian politics was born. As a young minister's wife, I listened intently to the crusade. My devoted husband and I signed up for membership.

For years afterward, we worked diligently in our church, encouraging members to go to the polls and help enact funda-

mentalistic ideals into law. However, as I matured, such ideals began to seem naive when juxtaposed against those of a compas-

provides a clear-eyed look at how bigotry and intolerance can become the tools of religious dogma, and how the fundamentalist zeal threatens to undermine the basic foundations of American political and religious freedoms.

sionate, inclusive worldview. Finally, rationalizations for the vision of the Religious Right crumbled, along with my faith.

By 1990, cynical and disillusioned, I had left both the movement and my troubled marriage, returning to college in an effort to reassemble the pieces of my life. I studied history and political science and in 1995 graduated with a master's in communications history. By then, I found the political rallying cry of fundamentalism as misguided as its doctrines, childlike in their naïveté.

This country was not created as a Christian nation, but as a secular state. Confusing this vital fact comes from misidentifying Thomas Jefferson with Cotton Mather, a leader of the Puritans who had arrived in

America 150 years before the Constitution was written. The Puritans had fled England in search of religious freedom, yet ironically, once in their new

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land, they denied spiritual liberty to others,

instituting instead their own brand of theocracy. They levied taxes to support the clergy, the government paid civil leaders to enforce religious dictates, and only members of the state-sanctioned Congregationalist church were allowed to vote.

Over a century later, the Founding Fathers set out to protect Americans against such intolerance and religious oppression. Jefferson insisted that the Bill of Rights was meant to ensure the liberty of all its citizens against ec-

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clesial coercion. He and his colleagues at the Constitutional Convention realized that historically most wars and tyrannies resulted from the misalliance between church and state (as we can see today in Northern Ireland, the Middle East, the Balkans, Asia, and Africa).

Our forefathers, therefore, set out to create a framework for the revolutionary concept of modern democracy—a secular state. Their scaffolding did not come from the Bible but from the Enlightenment. Rationalism lies at the root of the American Republic; man's intellect, not Scripture, is the source of Jeffersonian truth.

Those of us who believe in the principles set forth by our Founding Fathers, and who have experienced firsthand the zealotry of Christian fundamentalism, are alarmed when we hear about an Alabama chief justice who insists on placing the Ten Commandments in the rotunda of a judicial building. We are concerned when a public school board attempts to add supernatural, creationist schemes to a science textbook.

As the Supreme Court in the Alabama case and Judge Jones in the intelligent design case recently acknowledged, government's Constitutional role is to create a safe harbor for all of its citizens—skeptical or devout. When a tax-

funded institution exhibits bias for any particular view of God (or even that there is a God), this protection ends. Keeping religious preference out of civil government is one of the blocks that uphold the foundation of America: the modern secular state.

In the years since my exodus from fundamentalism, working as a college counselor and a public television producer, I've met scores of people who also fear the political agenda of the Religious Right. We are united in breathing a sigh of relief when the U.S. Supreme Court declares that the Ten Commandments must be pulled from two Kentucky courthouses. We recognize the intolerance of religious fundamentalism and agree with Thomas Jefferson, who warned that whenever government teams up with the church, it creates a "formidable engine against the civil and religious rights of man."

Looking back on my life, as I do in my memoir, I don't so much regret the fact that I followed the path that I did—I met some wonderful people, and my three incredible children are the product of my marriage to a fundamentalist preacher—as I wish I could have had the maturity and wisdom to denounce the intolerance and injustice that even then I recognized in the teachings of the Religious Right. By speaking out now, and by writing my story, I hope I can begin to make a difference. ■