

# Phantoms of Lost Liberty

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Down the street, there's a park about half the size of a city block. Tucked away in the corner is a four-foot granite monument inscribed with the Ten Commandments, the core credo of a 3,000-year-old eastern Mediterranean cult started by sun-stroked nomads.

For the last year, that monument has been at the center of controversy because of a lawsuit to get it removed from the park. According to plaintiffs, its presence violates the supposed guarantee of governmental neutrality in matters of mythology. But the loud God-fearing folk of this town have mobilized to "save" the Ten Commandments on the grounds that only good can come from having these writings on permanent display in the public arena, presumably for the same reasons given by those who thought that posting the Ten Commandments in public schools would magically prevent another Columbine High School-style outburst of murderous alienation and rage.

One of the more wretched outgrowths of the fanaticism to guard against the removal of the granite slabs from the park has been the proliferation of small, cheap, blue-and-white plastic lawn signs printed with an oddly-abridged version of the Ten Commandments. These ornaments are stuck in front of houses all over town, and they are in such great demand that there are reports of them being stolen from front lawns, apparently by true believers who don't know that covetousness and theft are expressly prohibited by their precious Commandments. These lawn ornaments are produced and sold by a local group called "Crossfire," an evocative name that conjures up the burning crucifixes of the Ku Klux Klan or a tactic for murder taught at army rifle ranges and police academies. Crossfire's executive director has said that the monument should stay in the park because "this nation was founded on a Judeo-Christian ethic. I don't think we should have to make an apology for that. It has served us well."

If "us" applies to people just like the executive director of Crossfire—white, middle-class, Christian patriarchs who get off on moralizing pedantry—then, indeed, his kind have been well-served by this nation-founding "Judeo-Christian ethic."

Consider the success of Attorney-General John Ashcroft. After losing his senatorial seat in 2000 to a three-week-old corpse, Ashcroft was rescued from oblivion to run the Justice Department in order to appease the rabidly religious white reactionaries who had supported Bush. Ashcroft is much beloved by the hard Right because he delights in the death penalty and is horrified by women's reproductive rights, dancing, gays, and lesbians. He is also a fervent Assemblies of God Pentecostal Christian, a sect that believes in faith healing, demonic possession, and "speaking in tongues" (during church services, people flop down on the floor and roll around while jabbering in jumbled phrases said to be the ancient language of angels). His religion also insists upon the reality of Biblical prophesy, which might explain why Ashcroft had Judge Clarence Thomas anoint his forehead with Crisco oil in the name of his god like some Old Testament warlord, predestined by divine will. In an official conference room at the Justice Department, Ashcroft thinks he is fulfilling his heavenly mandate by asking his employees to join him in prayer, daily Bible study, and the singing of nationalist hymns that he composed.

Recently, Ashcroft ordered burqas for a pair of twelve-foot aluminum statues (the bare-breasted Spirit of Justice and the loinclothed Majesty of Law) in the lobby of the Justice Department because "he didn't like being photographed in front of them." Corporate media reported this half-jokingly as Ashcroft's uptight prudishness, just as

the newspapers around here spin the Ten Commandment monument story as an example of “religious intolerance” on the part of the atheists who initiated the lawsuit.

But the shrouding of the Spirit of Justice is not just priggishness wrought by Ashcroft’s bizarre religious predilections—it is a grave symptom entirely consistent with his lust “to do what he thinks his god wants: erect a theocratic National Security State by dismantling civil liberties.

Likewise, the superstitious panic over getting the Ten Commandments monument out of a city park is not a fight to protect the right to freedom of religion from atheist lawsuits, but it is actually about abolishing the fundamental human right to freedom from religion.

Insatiable authoritarian fantasies of obedience, pathological piety, and compulsory patriotism have clearly been “served well” by the “Judeo-Christian ethic” that the director of Crossfire has been speaking about. Testifying before a senate committee in December 2001, Ayatollah Ashcroft warned that “those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty ...only aid terrorists, for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve.” It is the concept of “God” deployed by the most powerful policeman in the U.S. that is the real “phantom” of “lost liberty.” “God” is a mirage that will always be most visible when liberty is being lost.

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