



Journal of Religion & Society

The Kripke Center

Volume 7 (2005)

Bryan F. Le Beau. *The Atheist: Madalyn Murray O'Hair*. New York: New York University Press, 2003.

[1] For a time in the 1960s and 1970s, Madalyn Murray O'Hair was "the most hated woman in America," reviled for her role as the nation's leading atheist and for her confrontational tactics in challenging those who supported state sponsorship of religious belief. O'Hair was no less known for her outlandish public behavior, as her hunger for attention - which rivaled the apparent intensity of her secularist convictions - placed her regularly in the spotlight, perhaps most famously during her brief stint as Larry Flynt's speechwriter in his bid for the U.S. presidency. And yet by the time of her 1995 disappearance and murder (her body was found six years later, along with those of her son and granddaughter), O'Hair had slipped into relative obscurity. Though remembered for her crusade against prayer in the Baltimore City public school system - which culminated in a 1964 victory before the Supreme Court - O'Hair and her cause had come to seem increasingly irrelevant to a public that no longer perceived atheism as a significant threat to the survival of the nation.

[2] In this first full-length biographical study of O'Hair, historian Bryan F. Le Beau seeks to affirm his subject's significance to twentieth-century American history, emphasizing O'Hair's importance in reinvigorating and advancing the cause of modern American atheism. Indeed, Le Beau demonstrates convincingly that it was O'Hair's dogged commitment to the sharp division of church and state that fueled the movement of skeptics, freethinkers, and nonbelievers during the middle decades of the century. While she was hardly the only individual to espouse such positions - indeed, in rendering its decision in *Murray v. Curlett*, the Supreme Court ruled concurrently on a similar case from Pennsylvania - it was O'Hair's fierce and eager embrace of the cause that made her the figurehead of the movement. Although the number of self-described American atheists has remained miniscule - estimated at no more than 1.6 million people in 1999 - during their heyday such individuals and their organizations enjoyed outsized influence, given the government's preoccupation with their possible links to "godless Communism." It was precisely this concern that made O'Hair, at least for a time, an enemy of the people, and one of the great strengths of the book is Le Beau's situation of the response to O'Hair in its changing historical context, from the anxieties of the Cold War to the comparative social tolerance of the Vietnam War era.

[3] While Le Beau seems to admire O'Hair for her bravery and determination, his study is unsparing in its examination of the individual behind the cause. Using a wealth of unpublished material - especially O'Hair's extensive diaries and personal papers - Le Beau paints a portrait of a woman who used her ideological conviction to justify a range of bizarre and objectionable behaviors. For instance, O'Hair associated with known anti-Semites, and was known to make racist and homophobic comments herself. Her notorious vulgarity helped attract widespread attention to her cause, but drove away some people otherwise sympathetic to her goals. O'Hair was also prone to serious ethical lapses, as suggested by the fact that her organization, American Atheists, was under investigation for tax evasion and financial mismanagement at the time of her disappearance. Such behavior was consistent with her general disdain for the rule of law, which she demonstrated by fleeing to Hawaii and Mexico in order to avoid arrest. Most troubling, perhaps, was her repeated willingness to place her own interests ahead of those of her children, which led in later years to her total estrangement from one son, William, who converted to evangelical Christianity and denounced his mother as little more than a charlatan and cult leader.

[4] To his credit, Le Beau adopts a hands-off approach to his subject, often letting O'Hair speak for herself in lengthy passages quoted directly from her correspondence, a fact that allows readers to judge O'Hair and the historical impact of her movement on their own terms. At the same time, this rather reserved authorial stance (coupled with a largely narrative and chronological structure) leaves unanswered some persistent and intriguing questions: what were the true roots of O'Hair's (non)belief? How did she manage to reconcile her views with some seemingly contradictory behavior, such as the Christian baptism of her two sons and her own church-sanctioned wedding? And finally, to what extent was O'Hair's commitment to the cause of atheism the product of sincere conviction or rather the manifestation of deep personal unhappiness and a desperate need for public attention, however negative? Notwithstanding such concerns, the book is an important and useful one, and its appearance coincides nicely with the fortieth anniversary of the verdict in *Murray v. Curlett*. More significantly, the current controversy over the decision by an Alabama judge to display the Ten Commandments in the state's judicial buildings is but the most recent indication that O'Hair and the questions she raised continue to remain vital and deeply relevant, however much she may have faded from the public consciousness.

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