

High Level Basketball, Opposition to Racism and Other Injustice...And Bigotry in the Name of Religion—Or, Does Dawn Staley Really Want To Be Known As “Taliban Dawn?”

The men’s and women’s college (NCAA) basketball championships have recently concluded.

The men’s championship was won, for the second straight year, by the University of Connecticut (UCONN).

Of greater interest—mainly for positive reasons, but unfortunately also for negative ones—is the women’s championship, which was won by South Carolina, finishing up an undefeated season with a win over Iowa and its super-star player, Caitlin Clark, in the championship game.

(In a two-part article at revcom.us, I get into what makes Clark such an outstanding basketball player, as well as big and controversial questions that have become involved in an evaluation of her game—including the fact that Clark, who is white, is a super-star in a sport that is identified with and dominated by Black people, in terms of who plays and excels in the game. I would urge not just basketball fans but everyone who cares about artistry and beauty—and about justice—to go to revcom.us and read that article.)

In this message, I am going to focus on the coach of the South Carolina women’s team, Dawn Staley—herself a former all-star basketball player, who has won awards two years in a row now as women’s college basketball coach of the year. After the championship game, Staley used the occasion to make a generous statement in appreciation of Caitlin Clark and the way she has elevated women’s basketball. And Staley has taken some good stands in opposition to racism and other injustice.

But, it is also the case that Staley, who adheres to a kind of fanatical Christianity, has abused her position as a representative of a *public university* (the University of South Carolina) to aggressively promote those religious beliefs, and even to attack people who do not share those beliefs. So, while Staley should be strongly defended against attacks by racists and other bigots because of the *good* stands she has taken, she needs to be sharply called out for her own violations of important principles and her own form of bigotry.

As set forth in the U.S. Constitution, there is supposed to be a “separation of church and state.” This means that institutions of government, including public institutions like the University of South Carolina, should not be used to promote religion. People who represent these institutions may, or may not, have personal religious beliefs, but no one should be using the platform of these institutions to promote their particular religion, or religion in general. Yet this is exactly what Staley has been doing.

Recently, in relation to the recent NCAA tournament, Staley has repeatedly given voice to the *ridiculous* notion that some supposed god actually cares about, and has been involved in, the South Carolina women winning the basketball championship (according to Staley, this victory for South Carolina, after its loss to Iowa last year, is the working out of this god’s “will” and “plan”)!

What if you are one of the teams that South Carolina played along the way? Does this mean that this supposed “god” is against you—and if you try to beat South Carolina, you are violating the “will” and “plan” of this “god?!” This is a *basketball tournament*—it should not be turned into some kind of **holy crusade!**

But that is still not the worst of it: Staley has gone so far as to proclaim, on national television, that if you don't believe in god, there is *something wrong* with you. For one thing, what if you are a student at the University—or others watching on national television—and you have a different religion, or no religion? How is this going to make you feel? And the problem—the negative effect—is even bigger than that.

In response to this outrageous statement by Staley, the answer is that there is nothing at all wrong—in fact there is something very *positive*, and *important*—in basing oneself on the scientifically-grounded refusal to believe in *things that do not exist*, including an imaginary god, or gods, whose existence was *invented by human beings*, while worship of these non-existent but supposedly divine beings has *been promoted by oppressive ruling classes and ruling institutions down through the ages—and still today*, because this can keep people from coming to understand, scientifically, the actual reasons why they are in the terrible situation they are in, and what can be done about this, right in this real world, by rising up against and overthrowing this system that is the cause of this terrible situation.

It is striking that, as far as can be seen, no one in an official position has indicated to Staley that it is *unacceptable* for her to use her platform as a representative of a public university to promote her religion—and to attack people who do not share that religion. But, then, despite what is in the Constitution, this is not really surprising, given how important it is to the ruling class that Black people and oppressed people generally be weighed down with religion and its anti-scientific distortion of reality, and how much the ruling class really likes and promotes Black people spouting “god talk.”

Staley's good stands, in some other areas—or her prowess as a coach and former player—does not make it alright to ignore, or excuse, her wrongful use of her position as a representative of a public university to promote her religious beliefs, and the harm done by her bigoted statement against people who do not share those beliefs. Yes, people have a right to their religion, but it is not right—it does tremendous harm—when they spread bigotry in the name of their religion, whatever the form of that bigotry. Imagine if Staley had said: If you are Asian, or Latino, there is something wrong with you. Or Jewish...or Muslim...and so on.

And, no, the fact that Staley is Black does not make what she said any less outrageous, disgusting and dangerous. Many horrendous crimes have been committed in the name of religion not just by white Europeans, but by non-white people in many parts of the world as well. A glaring example today is the Taliban in Afghanistan—whose horrific Islamic fundamentalist rule, terrorizing masses of people, is based on religious fanaticism. Does Staley really want to become known as “Taliban Dawn?!” Of course, even with her religious fanaticism, of the Christian variety, Staley is in no way guilty of the terrible atrocities that the Taliban have committed—against those they regard as unholy “infidels,” against women, against people generally. And, as I have noted, Staley has taken some positive stands on important questions. But the *logic* of her openly expressed bigotry, against people who do not share her religious beliefs, can lead in a *terrible direction*. This certainly does not do any good for Black people, or for other oppressed people—it does real harm to the fight against oppression and injustice.

However, unlike the Taliban, there is still a way for Staley to do right in this. People who care about justice need to say, straight up, to Staley:

Yes, you have a right to your religion—but you need to quit abusing your position as a representative of a public university to promote your religion (or religion in general), which you should know is just wrong. And you need to get up off this bigoted garbage against people who do not share your religious beliefs, make your opposition to injustice and bigotry consistent, and take up the all-around largeness of mind and generosity of spirit that is crucially needed in these times.

In a number of works—including the book *Away With All Gods! Unchaining the Mind And Radically Changing The World*, the *Dialogue I did with Cornel West in 2014*, and the more recent Interview I did on the Youtube *RNL (Revolution, Nothing Less!) Show*—I have emphasized the importance of recognizing people's right to religion and expressing respect for, and the need to unite with, people whose religious beliefs include stands in opposition to injustice. But, at the same time, I have also made clear the actual *harm* that religion does, in general and particularly in contributing to keeping Black people and others in a situation of terrible oppression. In future messages, I will come back to this very important question.



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