

the end of secularism



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The End of Secularism

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Introduction:

My Story

I was once a secularist. I believed in God, but I didn't see what difference that made to anything outside my private world. Private religion is at the heart of secularism. My relationship with God was simple. If I felt fear, I asked him to protect me. If I wanted, I asked him to provide. His character was not particularly of interest to me. The God who existed in my mind during my life up until college was essentially a cosmic genie.

Beyond the realm of my personal desires and wishes, I saw no place for God other than in ceremonies like baptisms, weddings, and funerals. That god is an accessory to occasions. He is like a magical charm designed to do what we want him to do. There are times when we bring him out with ornaments, bows, and ribbons. Otherwise, we box him up in the attic and only occasionally remember or contemplate him. For me, the private god-in-a-lantern model was the appropriate way to think about God and/or religion.

To discuss such things at my public school or at the mall or walking to the basketball court informally with friends seemed gauche and embarrassing. I think I would rather have ripped my pants in public than talk about God in the middle of a "mainstream" gathering. I felt shame for other people who crossed that line. The reaction I had is pretty typical of a secularist's feelings about public religion. It is distasteful, out of place, and irrelevant. In retrospect, I now believe those feelings of discomfort drive secularists to encourage the privatization of religion. Expressions of public faith offend them in the way pornography offends certain other people. Something that should have been kept behind closed doors has been exposed for all to see. Better to make ideological zoning laws to force such things to the outskirts of town.

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Those were my views despite the fact that my parents attempted to raise me as a Christian. There was nothing heavy-handed in how they went about it. They took me to church and Sunday school. I was so mentally disengaged that I went through those many years without ever understanding why the Romans crucified Jesus. Religious friction in my family led to personal secularism in my life. My mother was Catholic. My father came from the restorationist Church of Christ. While they did not fight with each other and worked in good faith to compromise, there was tension in other family relationships that left me with the opinion that my life would be simpler without thinking much about any particular religion. I was satisfied with my private God of no particularity. The famed sociologist Emile Durkheim thought that societies created their own gods as a way of worshipping their collective identity. Based on my experience, I think the charge is better directed at these private gods who make no demands and exist purely for the purpose of potentially fulfilling wishes. They are simply more powerful versions of the human submitting requests to them.

It was only when I left home to attend college at Florida State University that I began to think differently. On my own, away from family life, I met people who took their Christianity quite seriously. Whether this was the sovereignty of God or happenstance I leave to the reader. The only answer I will not accept is that I was seeking these Christians. I wasn't. The first time someone asked me if I had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, I felt uncomfortable and put upon. I was annoyed in the same way one feels when approached by a stranger asking for money on a pretense. However, it happened that I made friends with a number of Christians. I observed their lives and listened to what they had to say. Importantly, I began to read the Bible and also to pay attention to Christian claims about the resurrection of Christ. Over time, I experienced a largely rational (somewhere Richard Dawkins is snorting) conversion to Christianity. By that, I simply mean I became convinced that what the New Testament says about Jesus Christ is true. There was no single moment when it happened. I can recall reading about a professor who described losing his faith by saying it was as if he had put his beliefs in a drawer and shut it only to find when he opened the drawer there was nothing there.

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My conversion was the opposite. I started with a nearly empty drawer and closed it. When I returned it was nearly full.

Upon becoming a Christian, I became aware of the strangeness of my idea of religion as a private thing. Christians, at least the kind I had come to know, talked about their faith. They did Bible studies that were sometimes purely devotional but were at other times organized around themes like social justice, racism, the environment, or the sanctity of life. These were public matters. Before my conversion, I can remember listening disinterestedly to a high school debate over abortion. The only thing that stayed with me was a moment of hilarity when one debater mistook the meaning of the word “euthanasia” for “youth in Asia” and exclaimed with outrage, “I don’t see what difference kids in China make to this discussion!” I was utterly hardened and felt nothing when one of the participants tried to explain the violence wrought upon a fetus. But after becoming a Christian, I listened with growing horror as a friend in the dormitory gave his reasons for why he thought God cared about abortion. My conscience was pricked in a way I hadn’t experienced before. I wonder whether others from a generation or two previous had similar experiences with regard to their views on race and segregation. What if God cares? It can be a sobering thought and a motivating one.

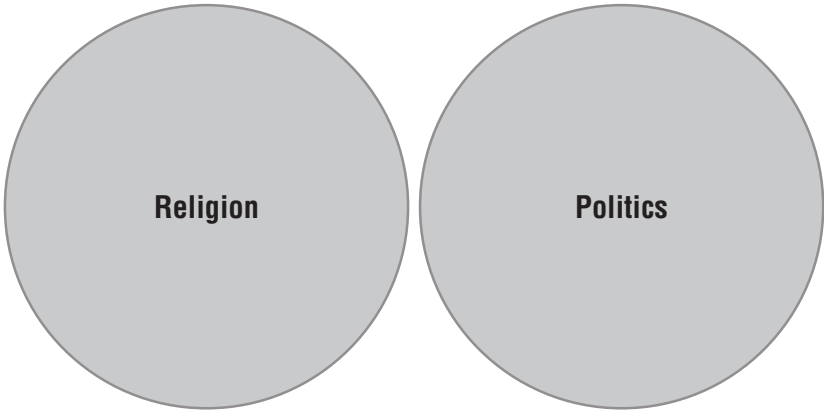
This bit of personal history offers a report from a life spent on both sides of the secular/public religion divide. I comprehend the disgust and discomfort the secularist has when listening to Christians or other religionists bringing God into public affairs. I also understand the feeling many Christians have that they must participate in public affairs to help maintain justice and to restrain evil. Pay attention to those words, *justice* and *evil*. When we talk about politics, we don’t engage in a debate that revolves around pure scientific and mathematical certainties. There is more discussion to be had. What is justice? What is love? What is equality? What kinds of things should we do for people? What kinds of laws shall we make? Right and wrong will enter into the picture and there is no compelling reason to rule secularism in and religion out. As both a Christian and a professional student of law and religion, I have come to believe secularists are profoundly wrong to suggest that leaving religion out of the public square is a good thing for all involved. Secularism is neither necessar-

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ily fair, nor clearly superior to other alternatives. Secularism is supposed to provide a new way forward for humankind. It is, in actuality, a dead end. This book seeks to prove that point.

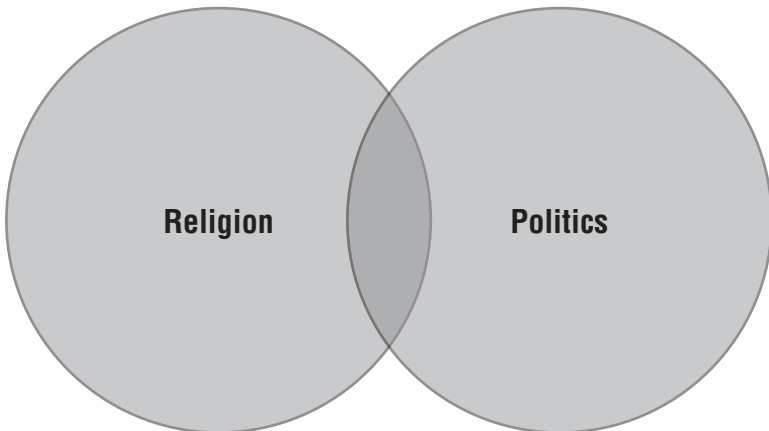
The secular understanding of religion and politics tends to divide the two things entirely as we see in Diagram 1.

Diagram 1: Religion and Politics per the Secularist



In reality, such thinking is too simple by far. More accurately, we could portray religion and politics as a Venn diagram (2), in which the two concepts overlap.

Diagram 2: Religion and Politics Rightly Understood

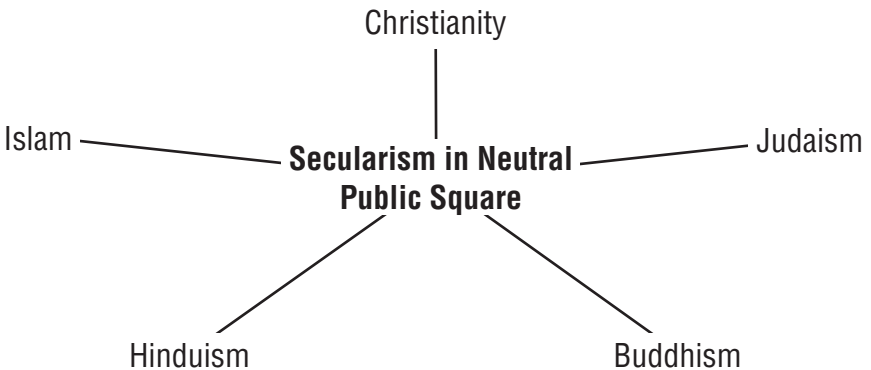


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This representation of the relationship between the two concepts captures the situation much better than secularism, which would separate them entirely. Diagram 2 embodies an acknowledgment that there are many questions of value confronted by a political system in which secular understandings have no real advantage over religious counterparts. Indeed, there may be certain understandings basic to a political system, such as human equality, that might be incomprehensible outside of some metaphysical foundation. Religion and politics are not two totally distinct areas of human activity. It is also true, however, that they are not coextensive. As the renegade Puritan Roger Williams insisted, it is possible to govern well and justly without possessing a correct understanding of something such as the doctrine of the Trinity.

Another way to understand part of the difficulty with secularism is to consider it in terms of simple worldview analysis. Secularists think of secularism as a neutral space in the polity benevolently keeping religions from dangerous, disharmonious, and potentially oppressive activity. This view can be pictured in Diagram 3.

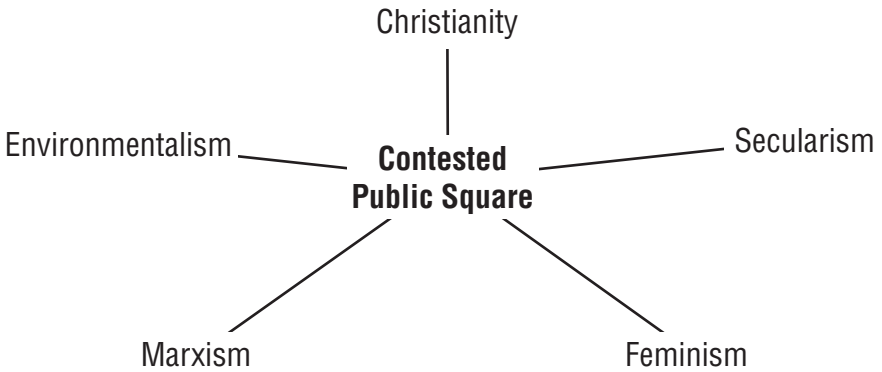
Diagram 3: Separating Religion and Politics Framework



However, the reality is that secularism does not provide a neutral space. It is one of many conceptual players attempting to influence social and political activity. Consider Diagram 4.

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Diagram 4: Secularism as Part of the Competing Orthodoxies Framework



We could make Diagram 4 much more complex and attempt to create a detailed ideological and religious map of the world, but the basic point holds even with a simple depiction. Secularism represents a partisan position, not a neutral one. And secularists are partisans. They attempt to create a political community that suits their preferences. Remember my story about being uncomfortable with public religion. Secularists very often feel that way. Secularism is a way to suppress that which they find troubling and to bring about the existence of a political and legal regime more agreeable to their tastes.

In the above diagrams, I have made two key points. One is that religion and politics are not fully separable or, at least, that there is no strong rational warrant for separating them. The other is that secularism is a partisan position with supporters and thus cannot be seen as the neutral answer to pluralism. I will endeavor to illustrate these points in detail in the subsequent chapters. The primary method is to study Christianity and secularism together, for surely the fates of the two have been intertwined.

Secularism as an Academic Subject

There is an old joke that religion departments exist to make sure atheists have a home on campus. I've never surveyed religion professors to see if the joke is true, but there is little doubt that religion doesn't fare

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very well in religion departments. The historian C. John Sommerville has invited academics to treat secularism much as they have religion, which means he thinks it should be studied, written about, and taught critically.¹ What would it mean to accept Dr. Sommerville's provocative invitation? Imagine a university department full of scholars dedicated to studying the phenomenon of secularism. Where did secularism come from? What do its advocates and practitioners believe? Why do they believe it? Do their most cherished beliefs stand up to scrutiny? How do they approach politics? What are their prejudices? Just what kind of people are these secularists? Is secularism just another way for the people of wealth and fashion to maintain their prerogatives against religious appeals for righteousness?

If there were such a thing as a secularism department at large universities, these are the types of pointed questions that would surely be asked in series of debates, conferences, research papers, and books sent off to the nation's academic libraries. They are also mirror images of the questions that are currently asked about various faiths and believers in our university religion departments. Unlike academic departments centered on race and gender-based concerns, which are always staffed by sympathetic scholars, religion scholars tend to be critical of their subjects rather than identifying with them.

In introducing the subject, I have imagined a department of secularism studies as the opposite of a religion department. And to some extent secularism is the opposite of religion. Whereas religions typically seek to know God's will and to live in accordance with it, secularists see that quest as divisive and try to bring us together by focusing on what we have in common without God. In the sense that religion means "with God" and secularism means "without God," the two are opposites. But the relationship is more complicated than that. For example, many conservative Christians have argued that secularism is just another religion and should be treated as one for purposes of constitutional jurisprudence. The idea is intuitively appealing but not quite right. Secularism often implies a worldview, just as religions have worldview implications. However, secularism is an idea that seeks to privatize religion. It is not, itself, a religion even if there have occasionally been groups of people claiming to be part of quasi-religions such as secular humanism or ethical culture.

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Because advocates of secularism present it as a solution to the “problem” of public religion, we become the audience for a caricature of the ways the two concepts are opposed to each other. Instead of “without reference to God” versus “with reference to God,” the antonyms expand to look more like “reason and tolerance” versus “prejudice and superstition.” This misunderstanding has not been accidental but is instead the thrust of the presentation pushed by advocates of a particular side. Thus, rational thinking processes, empirical verification, and social harmony are said to accompany a secular outlook. Religious associations, on the other hand, are tied to mysticism, violence, ignorance, and coercion. The secular take on religion is more Torquemada, Jim Jones, and Osama bin Laden than Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Newton, and Pascal.

Garry Wills, writing for *The New York Times* after the reelection of George W. Bush, bemoaned the turn of Americans from “intelligence . . . and regard for secular sciences” to resembling America’s fundamentalist Islamic enemies more than its cousins in Western Europe. One of his key evidences was that Americans believed in the virgin birth in greater numbers than they endorsed Darwin’s theory.²

Former Clinton Secretary of Labor Robert Reich and a bumper crop of nouveau village atheists (e.g., Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris) perceive religious belief as a deliberate decision to ignore reason in favor of dangerous and arbitrary superstition. Prior to the 2004 presidential election Reich wrote:

The underlying battle will be between modern civilization and anti-modernist fanatics; between those who believe in the primacy of the individual and those who believe that human beings owe blind allegiance to a higher authority; between those who give priority to life in this world and those who believe that human life is no more than preparation for an existence beyond life; between those who believe that truth is revealed solely through scripture and religious dogma, and those who rely primarily on science, reason, and logic.³

On this view, religion is like white phosphorus. It should be submerged lest it ignite. This reading somehow forgets that a Christian culture gave birth to our Western emphasis on science and reason and that the church was an important patron of scientific work. But that

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can be forgiven. Dr. Reich has been brought up on ideological history of a particular sort as most of us have been. That is a matter to which I return in subsequent chapters.

Understanding Secularism

The provocative prose of Secretary Reich notwithstanding, the logic of secularism is persuasive on the surface when wielded a bit more delicately. The argument is simple:

- 1) We believe different things about God.
- 2) Throughout history, people have killed each other because of those different beliefs. They have sometimes done so on a large scale.
- 3) If we do not have indisputable empirical proof of God's existence and/or of what God wants, then the persecution of others who believe differently is unwarranted and gravely wrong.
- 4) In fact, given our lack of certainty regarding God, we should simply avoid the influence of religious ideas in our public space.
- 5) It is one thing for people of faith to gather together, in a place of worship, for example, and to talk about their religion, but it is another to bring beliefs into the diverse world in which we live together.
- 6) It would be better for all involved (the argument goes) if we would simply exclude religious considerations from commerce, politics, education, law, and any other public endeavor.

The virtuous person of faith, then, is a private person of faith. Religion, in the secularist's scenario, is sort of like a hobby. Enthusiasts should save their talk and activities for times and places they arrange together.⁴

Secularism is much more than a formal financial and legal separation of church institutions from state institutions. It is a way of living together in community that emphasizes clean conceptual boundaries over organic beliefs and traditions. Here we come to a critical point. Secularism is not and should not be synonymous with the separation of church and state. The separation of church and state, in the classical sense, simply means that the state does not collect fees to support the church; neither does it mandate membership in the church. Classical separation, as I have just defined it, is a wonderful arrangement Americans arrived at as a practical solution after many years of

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dealing with the difficulty of pluralism and the old European model of one church and one state.

When Christians rail against the separation of church and state and heatedly charge that those words do not appear in the Constitution, they are really reacting to secularism. The problem is that the language of the separation of church and state is often used to push for more secularistic understandings. Given a right understanding of secularism as the separation of religion from public life and the separation of church and state as nothing more than formal institutional independence of church and state, citizens should value church-state separation as the healthier and more justifiable state of affairs.

Secularism is a different concept. It is directly tied to secularization theory, which posits that advanced societies essentially outgrow religion and gain ever greater independence from it. Religion loses its relevance to the public world. Individuals and subcommunities may believe fervently, but that is not something to impact public business or our professional lives. The iconic sociologist Max Weber imagined a process in which virtually every human endeavor would freely discover its own excellence and its own boundaries without religion hovering above offering guidance or judgment.⁵ This process may help explain why ideas such as medical ethics and business ethics often seem so useless in our time.

The development of secularization and secularism may seem attractive to many. Religious pluralism is a fact of the modern world in which people travel and migrate with a high degree of freedom. If it is possible to conduct most activities, particularly public ones, in such a way as to avoid religion and religious differences, then friction should diminish and social progress should increase. What person of goodwill would look askance at such a promising development? Secularism appeals to common-ground approaches to getting along with others. "Let's leave aside the things that divide us, like religion, and focus on those things we all have to deal with like jobs, transportation, food, and education." In a world divided into a growing number of religious factions, secularism has been supposed by many to be an answer to the fact of religious plurality. The logic of secularism is that by conducting our affairs without reference to God, we can

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avoid religious division and deal with each other in a peaceful way. Secularism, the argument goes, is a recipe for social harmony.

Advocates of secularism also advance the idea that secularism is rationally superior to religious alternatives in the sense that it hews more closely to the path of science and empirical rationality. The tie between secularism and science has two primary sources. The first is the story of warfare between science and religion, which first began to be told with frequency in the late nineteenth century⁶ and was extended for a long run with the slowly deflating mythos of the Scopes trial.⁷ The second is the sociological theory of secularization, which has (in its widest reaches) viewed secularization as the destiny of man as he shakes off the immaturity of religious faith and becomes an advanced creature of scientific rationality.⁸

Previewing the Path of the Argument against Secularism

Because secularism was born through a process of development rather than springing forth whole from the troubled brow of a Greek god, the next several chapters will necessarily deal with the story of the theological question in the West. The goal is to briefly replay the history of the West since the time of Christ in order to illustrate different stages in the relationship of politics and religion. Looking at the stages, the reader has an opportunity to appreciate the advantages and drawbacks of various approaches to integrating or segregating the church and the state. The reader is also able to see how secularism emerged after being essentially unthinkable for most of the history of mankind.

The next set of chapters takes a detailed look at the development of the American public order. Because there is a seemingly endless debate over whether the United States was founded as an explicitly Christian republic or, conversely, as a determinedly secular order, there is value in attempting to set the record straight. Analysis reveals that both parties, Christians and secularists, overstate their side of the argument. However, close analysis demonstrates that claims that the Constitution and its religion clauses somehow established a secular republic are simply incorrect. The reality is that Constitutional texts dealing with religion simply preserved the autonomy of the states in that regard, which helps explain the unsatisfactory result of Supreme

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Court jurisprudence reading those phrases like tea leaves. This part of the book then documents how secularism ultimately did develop in the United States and how Christians reacted to the increased salience of a secularistic social philosophy.

Secularism presents as a guarantor of social peace in a religiously pluralistic environment. The argument of the middle chapters will be that a secular approach simply shifts the social burden from one group of citizens to another. That argument is developed in three key ways. First, I demonstrate the lack of neutrality inherent in secularism as an approach to regulating the social order by looking at the points made by postmodernists and Christian critics. Second, I use the work of Christian Smith and others to show that American secularism was not so much a natural development as it was something pushed by interested agents in sometimes very forceful ways. Third, I look to the existence of secularists as a demographic group whose preferences line up so directly with a secular social order that it may as well have been set up for their comfort. Studying secularism and its partisans, rather than merely employing the concept as a critical lens through which to view religion, yields a more realistic appraisal of its merits. If secularism is simply a device for advancing the agenda of a particular group at the cost of imposing a burden on other groups, then there are clear problems with maintaining that it is the best method of maintaining social harmony.

The penultimate set of chapters will address the assumption that secularism is rationally superior to theistic alternatives. This part of the argument begins by addressing the idea that science and secularism go together. The warfare model of science and religion presents religion as dangerous and backward and thus leaves secularism as the protector of all good things such as electricity, medicine, and air travel, not to mention the expansion of human knowledge that might lead to elimination of disease and even possibly to physical immortality. By examining that history and showing substantial problems with the warfare model, I seek to remove the impression that Christianity is naturally hostile to science, even in its orthodox forms, and to knock a leg out from under the idea that secularism is necessary to the productive social use of science.

I then move on to point out there is nothing necessarily scientific

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about a secular approach to formulating political ends. Rather, secular and religious approaches to formulating political ends such as justice, mercy, and fairness all fall into areas of knowledge that are simply not scientific; thus, neither can claim that mantle. Unless secularism reverts to a thoroughgoing positivism (the idea that nothing is real that we cannot confirm with our senses), then it cannot claim scientific authority for its proposals. Despite our penchant for easily accepting the contention that knowledge divides into the secular and the religious, the primary thrust of the critique will be that knowledge does not divide in that fashion. Rather, there is the knowledge that we can gain via scientific experimentation and verification and then there is everything else. The “everything else” happens to be where secularism and religion do their work along with a host of other attempts to make sense of the parts of life we really care about and that happen not to yield scientific answers. Secularism does not deserve to be seen as the representative of science in law and politics against the religious. Awareness of the reality erodes the appearance of a special affinity between science and secularism, which thus far has counted for much in public debate.

In the concluding chapters, I offer a striking case study from a few years ago when a Christian law professor and a state governor set out to reform the tax code in line with the philosophy of Jesus Christ. The events of that strange year down south demonstrate much about the political motivations and unprincipled selectivity of the guardians of secularism.

The idea that rests at the foundation of this entire investigation and critique of secularism is that though it is a way of addressing problems of religious pluralism, it is far from the only way. It is certainly more extreme than simple institutional separation of church and state because it entails religious privatization. Just as microsurgery proves more effective than the amputation of a limb, there are better ways to deal with religious pluralism than removing religion from public life. In short, there are good reasons to question whether secularism is the enlightened path to living together.

My studies have led me to conclude that the case for secularism is partisan, shallow, and under-examined. In these pages, I have assembled the bill of particulars against secularism that I have long wanted to read in one volume but have never found.

The Non-uniqueness of Theocratic Danger

It is not enough, in lodging a complaint against secularism, to demonstrate the inherent partisanship in its preference for the public thought and behavior of one group of citizens over the others. After all, it would make sense to embrace secularism despite its difficulties if it were uniquely protective against certain dangers. Secularism is often proposed as a desperately needed wall against the evil of theocracy, for example.

If the French Revolution did not establish the principle firmly enough, the “scientific” dictatorships of the twentieth century successfully proved that secular ideologies could also flagrantly violate human freedom in the service of bringing a bold, new world to pass. Instead of conformity to a particular religious vision, the allegiance required was to detailed ideologies.¹ The danger of secular totalitarianism appears to be as great as that of religious totalitarianism. Douglas Laycock once expressed his fear of being ruled by the Christian Coalition but then immediately added that he would be equally concerned by the domination of environmentalists or feminists. His point is that religion does not present a threat unique from that generated by any other organized human endeavor based on strong convictions.²

But forget totalitarianism. What about religion in a democracy? Is it true, as Robert Audi suggests, that the exercise of religious belief in the formation of public policy presents a unique harm to the unbeliever as he or she is forced to succumb to the coercion of the law?³ Perhaps it is this less dramatic but still real threat that secularism will

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protect against. Audi's idea is easily challenged, however. The simple fact is that coercion never feels good. One need not be forced to live under Christian or Muslim values to feel severely put upon. Equally negative emotions may arise when socialists, feminists, or ethnic groups find channels for imposing their will.

In fact, it is easy to envisage situations where thoroughly secular public policy will do more psychic harm by coercing individuals than religiously inspired coercion might. Imagine the pacifist libertarian who is horrified by almost everything the United States government does, whether Democrats or Republicans rule, but is still compelled to fully participate financially. Contrast a mainstream secular citizen whose children have the option to sit passively while other children are led through a nonsectarian prayer at school. Given the comparison, one is hard-pressed to justify Audi's unique harm analysis. It is here that we see one of the main problems of Audi's scheme. He gives no consideration to the stakes involved. A publicly funded religious display (such as the Ten Commandments) is almost certain to create less resentful feelings than a decision to substantially raise taxes on gasoline. The essence of the problem is that law involves coercion and being coerced is unpleasant and possibly even tortuous. Whether that coercion is religious, philosophical, or even based on a radically different reading of the available facts, the harm is the harm. Secularism and secular rationales do not solve the problem. Coercion is the problem.

It is a problem that is not likely to become less troublesome, particularly in the interaction of religion and government. The lack of significant federal jurisprudence on the religion clauses prior to the middle of the twentieth century is no accident. As government has increased its grasp through a combination of technological competence and changing philosophical paradigms, the growth of the regulatory state and the sheer number of governmental functions guarantee that problems will arise. Again, this is not a complication that secularism solves.

Michael McConnell notes that the rise of the "welfare-regulatory state" dissolved the old paradigm in which religion and government had clearly demarcated functions in American life. Government had once been limited to "commerce and civil order" while churches

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focused on “charity and the inculcation of goodness and truth,” but that changed when the state began to grow into areas of life that were previously “private and frequently religious.” The natural result has been conflict with both “religious institutions” and “the religiously motivated activity of individuals.”⁴

As the government’s role expands, the territory for religion in public life goes through a corresponding contraction, almost of necessity per a strict separation view of the Establishment Clause. According to McConnell:

When the state is the dominant influence in the culture, a “secular state” becomes equivalent to a secular culture. Religious influences are confined to those segments of society in which the government is not involved, which is to say that religion is confined to the margins of public life—to those areas not important enough to have received the helping or controlling hand of government.⁵

Thomas Berg identifies the same tendency of the secular state, writing that a government holding itself separate from “religious influences” is far more tolerable when the government’s role is tightly limited. The same dynamic does not hold when the government significantly expands, as it has in the wake of the New Deal and the War on Poverty, into a nearly omnicompetent state.⁶

The problem comes to its clearest focus when we consider public education. McConnell sees public schools promoting “a new set of values no less sectarian than the old: environmentalism, safe sex, opposition to whatever is thought to be racism and sexism, sexual freedom, and a critical posture toward the role of the West in the oppression of the rest of the world.”⁷ His critique reaches a level of poignancy when he relates the frustration he feels with regard to the educational experience of his own children:

One can still go through elementary and secondary school today and not be aware that religion has played—and still plays—a major role in history, philosophy, science, and the ordinary lives of millions of Americans. I sense the effect in my own elementary school-age children: they wonder how I can think God and Jesus Christ are so important to the workings of nature and history when they never hear about such things in school.

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A secular school does not necessarily produce atheists, but it produces young adults who inevitably think of religion as extraneous to the real world of intellectual inquiry, if they think of religion at all.⁸

Here again, Thomas Berg draws a similar conclusion.⁹ He sees that when government funds and operates a system of public schools that carefully separate church and state but “teach competing ideas ranging from secular moral theories to patriotism to evolution,” the result is a strong bias in favor of secular viewpoints.¹⁰ The charge rings more powerfully true when we consider that “financial pressure on families to choose low-cost public schools over a religiously informed education does work a powerful discrimination against (at least some) religious ideas and in favor of the secular teachings in the schools.”¹¹

Francis Canavan made many of the same points well before either McConnell or Berg. Before anyone really applied the insights of post-modernism to the church-state question, Canavan declared “secular monism” to be “increasingly out of date” for any welfare state hoping to maintain real pluralism. Keeping education and other social services strictly secular would fail dramatically at achieving neutrality between the available options. Rather, such a state could only avoid the problem of an expanding, crowding-out mechanism of secularism by permitting and encouraging “private, including religious, institutions of welfare to serve the public as effectively as state institutions do.”¹² Such ideas have been entertained in the last decade, but not much acted upon. Faith-based charity regulation continues to be a contentious morass.

System versus Lifeworld

In the light of this problem of a secular state overgrowing other ways of life and other perspectives through inertial force reminiscent of the old “bracket-creep” problem of the federal tax code, religion is increasingly seen as a protector of what is sometimes termed the “lifeworld” (family, tradition, faith, ways of life) against the “system,” which represents a combination of secular big-government bureaucracy and international capitalism. It took the Cold War and a century of brutal dictatorships around the world to reestablish the

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image of religion as a force for righteousness and the limitation of grasping government.

In his distinguished study of public religions and their role in a world characterized by modernity, José Casanova takes up the following questions:

- 1) Is there a legitimate religious resistance to secular worldviews that is more than a refusal to accept the consequences of the Enlightenment?
- 2) Is there a legitimate religious resistance to de-politicization, a resistance that is more than a clinging to inherited privileges?¹³

Casanova returns affirmative answers to both questions. Religion serves as “a protector of human rights and humanist values against the secular spheres and their absolute claims to internal functional autonomy.”¹⁴ Religion need not and should not allow itself to be secularized out of politics.

According to Casanova, the normative claim of modernity on religion is that it accepts rights of privacy and conscience. But religion does not run afoul of those prescriptions when it goes public to protect its own freedom and other modern rights and freedoms against an authoritarian state, when it questions and contests the freedom of various social spheres to operate utterly free of moral regulation, and when it protects “the traditional life-world” from encroachment by the state.¹⁵

In accord with this framework, Casanova sees an active counter-movement forming against the secularizing tendencies of the modern state. Religions are refusing to be privatized into social irrelevancy. For example, in many Latin American countries the Catholic Church has taken an active role as a champion of the people against the state. This turn of affairs is somewhat remarkable given the history of the region and the Catholic Church’s traditional alliance with state power via establishmentarian arrangements. In like manner, American fundamentalist Christians have emerged from virtual social isolation to make a substantial impact on public affairs. Although it may be the case that the somewhat more “respectable” evangelicals and Catholics are now at the forefront, it was the former outsiders such as Falwell and Robertson who got the ball rolling with acts of almost gauche de-

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privatization that gave nightmares to secular social elites who in turn wrote prose suggesting new Inquisitions are around the corner. The fact that a man like John Ashcroft, who combines Ivy League education with real and open Pentecostal belief, could be appointed attorney general during a critical period in American history shows how correct Casanova is in his analysis of de-privatization. Despite these developments, the question remains as to whether deprivatization will halt or even reverse the established trend of the system growing into space once occupied by the lifeworld.

William Swatos extends the system and lifeworld framework specifically to the public school. Swatos views the public school as the system's representative encroaching upon the lifeworld, which has a strong organic claim to raise children in a way conducive to the parents' desires. The public school, as a system agent, develops the child in a way suitable to the wishes of the system with scant regard for the desires of the parent. Now, it continues to be the case that parents can remove their children from the public school system, but private schools are not beyond regulatory reach and the resort to them represents a double expenditure for those who are already paying taxes to support the public school. Into the situation steps the conservative Christian who contests many things about the public school with regard to the place of religion in ceremonies, whether children may voluntarily focus on religious themes in their assignments, whether children may bring a Bible, wear religious jewelry, and witness to their faith, and whether they should be exposed to curricula that are expressly at odds with the Christian faith such as the content of sex education courses. The conservative Christian becomes, intentionally or not, the champion of the lifeworld.

This is a development Swatos applauds because of his desire to see human diversity maintained against the system.¹⁶ The verdict is that religion is a crucial bulwark in the protection of human rights, such as the right to raise one's children without excessive interference or overregulation. The tendency of secularism to push religion into private space works in like manner to knock over checks on institutions such as church and family that preserve a space for life outside a growing governmental apparatus that wrongly perceives secularism as necessarily freedom-enhancing.

Conclusion

Inherent in the nature of secularism as a basis for the social order is the idea that leaving religion and religiously influenced ideas out of the political process is the best way to broker harmony in pluralistic communities. By focusing on our common reason, the speculation goes, we will avoid the divisiveness of religion in public affairs. The sociological theory of secularization has walked hand-in-hand with the argument for secularism with the former being the engine that helped drive toward the latter. Today, the theory of secularization is in retreat and/or is being substantially reconceived in more modest form. The notion of secularism is being secularized (to use David Martin's phrase) by a postmodern analysis that skeptically questions the claim of secular liberalism to be a neutral broker for the polity's political process. This dual assault on secularization and secularism drops a giant question mark at the end of any aspirations toward a wholly secular public order.

The postmodern analysis damages anyone's ability to easily give credence to claims of neutrality. Instead, the hermeneutic of suspicion leads the inquirer to look for interested parties. Has secularization really been a naturally occurring process? Has it really been as dominant in the life of Americans (or other world peoples) as the theory would suggest? Is secularism really to the benefit of everyone without privileging anyone? The answers in this chapter undermine the façade of peace and neutrality. The theory of secularization has been overstated. The notion of secularism as a neutral basis for the public order has been sharply disputed, particularly when one throws in the variable of an expanding social-welfare state and public education. There are such things as secularizing agents with real intent to secularize and therefore shape institutions and the public order in their own image. Secularism is just another position on the theo-political spectrum, perhaps better than some options but not necessarily superior to others. It seems quite possible, for example, that political liberalism need not be secularist in nature.