

Secularism and Religion in Modern Democracies

Written by Brendan Sweetman

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BRENDAN SWEETMAN, AUG 4 2010

Modern, free, democratic, pluralist societies have many virtues, but they are also increasingly encountering one significant problem, what I call “the problem of pluralism.” This is the problem of how to deal with a number of different, competing, and often conflicting, worldviews or philosophies of life in the modern democratic state, especially at the institutional level, such as in schools, government agencies, political parties, parliament, and most especially at the level of law. This problem can be approached either as a theoretical problem or as a practical problem. At the theoretical level, we would consider this matter as part of our analysis and justification of the theory of the democratic, pluralist state. This involves thinking about how procedurally such a state can be established and can function as a stable political entity if it is trying to accommodate and facilitate many different approaches to and understandings of the nature of reality, the human person, and issues concerning moral values, and the meaning of life. It is also very important when considering the theoretical question to think about how the values and procedures upon which the state is founded are *themselves* justified without seeming to privilege one particular worldview in the state over others. But the problem of pluralism can also be approached from a more practical point of view—as a practical problem facing a particular state, or various states, in the real world right now, states that have some combination of a constitution, laws, procedures, and executive, legislative, and judicial arrangements, *already in place*, states which then have to grapple with problems of competing worldviews *within this framework*. For example, there might be three major approaches in a particular state for thinking about the allocation of healthcare resources, or how to deal with poverty, or on the issue of abortion, or stem cell research, and the state must have some procedure for making decisions about these matters.

It is not my intention to discuss or resolve the complex but fascinating problem of pluralism here, but I do want to draw attention to a key point that is frequently overlooked in this discussion—that, in the context of modern pluralism, we must now regard secularism as one of those worldviews that plays a quite significant role in the direction and nature of the modern state. And, further, once we do this, our whole understanding of the role of religion in the modern state is transformed as well. I have argued elsewhere and want to repeat here that secularism must now be seen as a positive worldview in the modern world that takes its place alongside other traditional (religious) worldviews in shaping the issues of the day. Secularism must not be understood as simply the view that there is no God, or that religious doctrines are not true, or that religious morality should be rejected, or something along these lines. We need to focus on what secularists believe (and on what they desire politically) rather than on what they do not believe. Secularism, in very general outline, may be understood as the view that all of reality is physical in nature, consisting of some configuration of matter and energy. Secularists also usually hold that everything that exists either currently has a scientific explanation, or will have a scientific explanation in the future. This view would also hold that the universe is a random occurrence, as is the existence of life on earth, including human beings. Supporters of this approach also insist on secularist accounts of morality and politics.

Our failure to appreciate that secularism is now a major cultural player and shaper of modern society has led to many confusions in our contemporary approach to and understanding of pluralism. We often say today that we are living in a secular state, or that people are becoming more and more secular, or that secularization is sweeping the globe, and so forth. These points are all true, but are only part of the story, and no longer the most important part. For this use of the term “secular” is intended only in a negative sense. It means that the religious way of looking at things, broadly understood, is losing its influence, or that “secularization,” which is often not carefully defined but which usually means something like consumerism, materialism, technology, this-worldly, etc., is pushing issues of the

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spiritual and moral life aside, but only rarely do we focus on what it is that is proposed as a replacement for the religious outlook. And this is where we need to start thinking and talking in terms of secularism as a positive worldview (what secularists believe) rather than in terms of “the secular” (what secularists reject).

So when some thinkers argue that we are now a more secular society, or that we need to promote a more secular approach—that this would be a good thing for modern democratic states—what do they mean? I am suggesting that this view cannot mean that we want to promote a *secularist* state, and that religious views should have no place in the political sphere. This is because secularism is simply one view among many in the modern state, and why should we grant secularism a privileged position among all of the worldviews? To be more specific, why should we give preference to secularist views of morality when deciding questions concerning abortion or stem cell research over various religious views (and let us note, as others have pointed out on *e-IR* and elsewhere, that there are various types of secularism, just as there are various types of religion, but this does not affect my general point).

Now supporters of secularism might argue that we should in fact promote a secularist state, that a secularist state would be better in general for progress, that is, a state guided by secularist accounts of reality, the human person, morality and the good life. One might want to promote what I call a *seculocracy*, which means a state where the laws are based on a secularist ideology or worldview (just as we sometimes call a state based on a religious ideology a theocracy). Or in the language of the U.S. Constitution, secularists might argue for a state where *their* views on significant political, social, and moral questions are established in law. One might believe and argue publicly that this is the best way forward for modern democracies. However, this position faces a major problem: while one is perfectly free to hold this position oneself, and to argue for it publicly, and even to argue that other (religious) worldviews are irrational, or that the secularist view is superior or whatever, one must recognize that in a free society many will argue just the opposite. In a free society, any type of restriction or suppression of a view *before* a public debate is held violates the basic principles of democracy and freedom.

As a possible way around this problem, one could instead adopt the approach that one can give *good reasons* for excluding religious views from politics, and so the secularist view should then dominate, or win by default. For instance, one might argue that religious beliefs are not rational, that secularist beliefs are more rational, or that religious beliefs are based on “faith,” or authority, or tradition, and that secularist beliefs are not, and so secularist beliefs are rationally superior. In short, one might argue that there is something “wrong” with religious arguments, some “problem” with them that does not apply to secularist arguments. But one must be very careful if one adopts this response. I agree that when one presents arguments in the public square, especially arguments that would shape society and culture, one needs to give rational arguments. But the religious believer will argue that religion has a rational side to it, has a long tradition of reason, and that we can appeal to this rational tradition as the philosophical justification for our religious beliefs. For example, one might argue that God exists, and is the creator of life, that life is extremely valuable, that the fetus is an innocent human life, and should be protected in law. Or one might argue that God created all people equally, and so racial segregation is wrong, or that it is part of God’s moral law that we are our brother’s keeper, and so we should support social welfare programs, and so forth. And arguments like these would not just assert the existence of God, but argue that it is rational to believe in God (the actual argument could be assumed in the public debate, but would be available in other venues, such as academia).

A secularist would no doubt reply that religious arguments like these are not rational, which is his right; however, he can’t use this opinion to somehow restrict these religious arguments from influencing public debates. As I pointed out, he is free to believe that such arguments are not rational, but not free to restrict those who do not agree with him. One cannot restrict a belief in a free society just because one disagrees with it politically, nor even because one thinks it is irrational. I would accept that in a democratic society we should try to be as reasonable as we can, should especially try to give reasons that would persuade others, so I would agree that one should *not* appeal to religious texts, or authorities, or to private experiences, in public arguments, as long as secularist-type arguments that are based on similar sources are also restricted in the same way.

Sometimes one will hear the objection that an appeal to “the secular” or to “secular reason” does not necessarily mean that one is advocating *secularism*. The use of the term “secular reason,” it might be argued, simply means that one appeals (or should appeal) to reason and evidence in one’s arguments on various issues. The word “secular”

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means only that one is making no appeal to religion; so a thinker who argues that one should appeal only to secular reasons in politics is not covertly suggesting that *secularism* should be the default worldview, and so arbitrarily prejudicing the debate against religion. But again this argument is not sufficient to rule religious arguments out of public life. We need to be careful about what the phrase “secular reason” means here. If it just means “reason,” then reason can be used to establish the rationality of basic religious beliefs, so the religious believer will argue (and it is irrelevant whether the secularist agrees with this or not from the point of view of a free democracy). That is to say, reason can be used to establish the rationality of basic religious premises and conclusions. But if the phrase means “secularism,” then we are back to the same problem as above. For to say that an argument that appeals to reason only can’t have (in principle) a conclusion with religious content is really just to say that religious beliefs are irrational, or at least not as rational (and so not as worthy) as secularist beliefs. One might, of course, be convinced of this oneself, but this is not enough; one has to convince the religious believer too if one wants to restrict religious belief in politics, and that is why no such argument can succeed. One of the often unstated assumptions of secularism is that “secular reason” (understood as secularism) is the same thing as reason. Religious believers of course will reject this understanding of reason, and in any case this is where the debate begins in a free society, not where it ends.

What does all of this mean for separation of church and state, usually regarded as a very important principle in a democracy? The separation of church and state means that we must not make our own particular worldview, be it religious or secularist of whatever strand, the official worldview of the state. We might ask if secularists want everyone to be secularists or do Catholics want to make everyone Catholics? The general answer to this question in most worldviews is no, at least not to convert people by force; if conversion happens freely, by persuasion, well and good. But just because we don’t necessarily want to convert people to our particular worldviews, this does not mean and *cannot* mean that we do not wish to *influence* the state, the culture, and especially the law, by means of *some* of our beliefs. All of us want to do this no matter what our worldview; it is unavoidable in any case, because *somebody’s* (or some group’s) values will be shaping our cultural, moral and legal decision-making, and, as a simple matter of logic, not all values can be accommodated. For example, if a state makes stem cell research on human embryos, or human cloning, legal, then those who think these practices are immoral and should be illegal lose out, and the values of those who support these practices become culturally dominant. There is, in short, no such thing as a neutral public square.

So we need to be very careful about adopting the rhetoric of church/state separation simply as way of keeping religion (and so political views we don’t agree with) out of public square debates. One can only insist on a separation of church and state if one means that the state will have no official religion, but we cannot invoke this separation if we mean that religious beliefs and values cannot be appealed to to influence society and culture. If this is what is meant, then secularists would be contradicting themselves every time they then go on to make an argument for cultural change based on *their* values. And I have already shown why one can’t reply to this point by saying that in fact secularism is actually superior anyway to any religious view, because no argument along these lines can succeed in restricting religious arguments in politics in a free society. If you subscribe to democracy, and believe in a free, open society, one cannot then turn around and restrict a view from trying to gain cultural influence just because one does not agree with it. One can argue against it publicly of course—indeed, one hopes that the public exchange of ideas can serve as a kind of rational test of various beliefs and arguments—but this is not the same as denying it the opportunity to be expressed in the first place by appeal to some procedural or legal maneuver.

So overall then we need to note the following. First, once we see that secularism is a significant, influential worldview in itself, it changes our whole way of thinking about church/state issues, and more generally about the role of religion in the modern democratic state. We must now see that the key philosophical question concerns how *all* worldviews come into contact with the state, and not just religious ones. Two, the reasons we give for keeping religion out of the debate at the beginning—before the democratic process has been played out—are now seen as suspect in a free society, with the one provision that *we should all at least strive to be as reasonable as we can*, meaning that we should try to give the best, most logical reasons, arguments and evidence to those we are trying to persuade (this also involves bringing all academic disciplines, where relevant, into the discussion). This is a real problem, however, in modern societies because of the increasing polarization between the worldviews, the attack on reason seen in areas like postmodernism, the increasing influence of epistemological and moral relativism, multiculturalism, etc., but

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this is a problem for every worldview. We cannot resolve this problem by forbidding worldviews we don't like to speak (nor can we resolve it by abandoning reason and justification, and allowing a free for all). Third, we must recognize that we are all trying to shape culture by means of our values and beliefs, and so we need to stop picking on members of various religious worldviews, as if they are the only ones doing this. Four, we should not appeal to church/state separation as a political tactic to silence views because we disagree with them politically. Five, we must also keep in mind the general question of how the democratic state is itself justified (is it part of one's worldview, or in place before one's worldview, and if the latter—which is the position of political philosopher John Rawls—how are the values on which it is based selected and justified?).

Lastly, the deepest question perhaps of all is how do modern democracies (now looking at the issues in the way suggested in this essay) solve or at least contain the problem of pluralism, without resorting to the suppression of some views, without producing too many disgruntled citizens, without abusing political power, and without slipping into moral and political relativism. This is one of the most difficult questions facing both twentieth first century democratic political theory, and existing democratic states.

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