

Church, State and Culture: Should Religion Be a Private Matter?

Written by Brendan Sweetman

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BRENDAN SWEETMAN, SEP 26 2015

This is an excerpt from *Nations under God: The Geopolitics of Faith in the Twenty-First Century*. Available now on Amazon (UK, USA), in all good book stores, and via a free PDF download. Find out more about E-IR's open access books here.

Editor's note: Due to an error, a different version of this article was published in the book. This represents the official version.

A type of a secular liberalism has become an influential, even dominant worldview among sections of what might be broadly described as the intellectual classes in many Western societies. Without needing to go into the content of this view in detail, its advocates generally hold that the physical realm is all there is (and will be studied by science), and so we need secularist accounts of politics and morality, and indeed eventually of all areas of life. A secularist account would be one that explains its subject matter (including human existence) in terms of physical stuff like matter and energy, and that, consequently, makes no appeal to the supernatural. Needless to say, advocates of this general approach to the nature of the universe and life do not by any means always agree among themselves concerning the details of such a view; yet there would be quite broad agreement on the general foundational beliefs of this worldview. This worldview is also sometimes referred to as naturalism, or philosophical atheism, or, as (my own preferred term) secularism.

Secularism

We can make a few general points about this view. First, its proponents often regard themselves as “enlightened” about matters of culture, society, law and politics. They see themselves as being in the vanguard of the progress of modern civilization; a consequence of this is that it is often a feature of this view that a significant number of its adherents adopt a superior, even supercilious attitude (almost as a matter of policy) toward other worldviews and their advocates with whom they disagree, particularly religious ones. The perception that one is “enlightened” also sometimes makes proponents of secularism impatient with naysayers, and often is the cause of their failure to apply consistently principles they profess to otherwise support, e.g. on free speech. A second significant feature of secularism is the way its advocates respond to the fact that the vast majority of people reject this view of reality and human life, and adopt a religious view instead; this response involves promoting the pragmatic argument that the religious worldview should be relegated to a private sphere. Secularists are fond of claiming that one can practice a religious view in one’s private life and circle of family and friends, but that it should have no influence on matters of public policy where it would have an effect on everyone, including those who do not accept it. This view is sometimes defended by appeal to a particular interpretation of an important democratic principle, the principle of the separation of church and state. The view that religion should be relegated to a private realm now permeates modern culture in the West to a very significant extent even though it is often inconsistently applied (which is why one often sees secularist media quoting religious leaders approvingly when they agree with what they say, and criticizing them when they don’t). It is also why one sees the principle of the separation of church and state selectively applied, so that it often appears less as a principle but as a tactic in a political debate (an example would be various political interest groups in the United States policing conservative churches for involvement in political issues, but not liberal

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Churches).

Although secularism is an increasingly influential worldview in certain circles, it faces one very large, indeed fatal, problem: it is rejected by many, who believe that it is not true! Now it is not my intention here to argue for the merits of secularism vs. religion in these brief reflections. Rather, I want to consider what we should do when we have fundamental disagreements of this nature—at the level of worldview—in our society, and to bring out various problems with the secularist position on these matters. But first we should make a few preliminary qualifications. I am assuming a democratic society as a backdrop—that we must settle our disagreements within the context of a democratic system (though obviously the same general issues could arise in other political systems as well). But democracy places us in a distinctive context that we must take into account when considering the general philosophical questions. Second, we must also recognize that we are working within a context of pluralism. Pluralism here means that we have several different worldviews present in the same state, and that advocates of each think their worldview should have some influence on political, moral, social and cultural debates. Sometimes this is called the *problem* of pluralism: the problem of what to do when there are different worldviews that are significant players in the same state, especially at the political and moral level. Third, I am not assuming that all secularists hold exactly the same worldview, nor indeed that all religious believers share the same beliefs. We must recognize that there will be different versions of secularism just as there are different religions; that not all secularists agree among themselves, and also that perhaps on some issues some religious positions might overlap with secularist views. We just need to keep before our minds the general orientation of each worldview; specific differences are not that significant when we are considering foundational philosophical questions.

Should Secularism be Presumptive?

What arguments might one advance to support the position that whenever there is a disagreement between a religious worldview and a secularist worldview, that the religious worldview should be confined to a “private realm,” that we should defer to the secularist worldview? That we can appeal to the secularist worldview in making political arguments, for example, but that we cannot appeal to a religious worldview, say when discussing issues of social justice, or abortion, or social welfare policies, or any of the issues of the day? I do not believe there any arguments for this conclusion that do not involve special pleading, or that are not based upon a prior commitment to the superiority of secularism. Nevertheless, two arguments are popular. The first is the argument that secularist worldviews and religious worldviews are in two different categories, and this fact allows us to treat them differently. This is a way of arguing that secularism is in some superior category which allows us to discriminate in its favor. It is often hard to specify the nature of this special category that confers a powerful advantage on certain worldviews, but one version of this first argument is that secularist views appeal to reason (and perhaps science) to support their claims, but religious views do not. Religious beliefs, it is claimed, are based on “faith,” understood in the sense of believing without evidence, or without regard to the evidence, often accompanied by the belief that faith is not subject to reason, or perhaps that faith is higher than (or outside of) reason.

I agree that when one proposes moral and political views, especially those that would shape society, one should try to give reasons as best one can, and also reasons that ideally might have some appeal to those who hold a different worldview. My contention is that religious believers do this all the time, and can do it for most of their moral and political beliefs. It is simply too simplistic to argue that all religious beliefs are based on “faith,” understood in this pejorative sense of not caring about the evidence, and that all secularist beliefs are not. Of course, for some of our beliefs we may not be able to express them in totally neutral, rational terms. But this is true just as much for secularist beliefs as it is for religious beliefs. For example, suppose I believe that everyone has the same basic set of human rights because God created all people equally, I should be able to appeal to this argument in my justification for social policy with regard to equality in job applications, for instance. If a religious believer cannot appeal to his belief in the truth of certain religious claims, then neither should a secularist be able to appeal to his belief in the truth of certain secularist claims (for example, his belief that the origin of life was a chance event that had a totally naturalistic origin, which might be the basis of his views on certain moral issues). Moreover, there is a significant element of *faith* involved in both sets of beliefs in the key sense that both views (and indeed all worldviews) make claims that go beyond what any rational argument or evidence could prove. So the most we can hope for, and indeed what we should strive for, are *reasonable* beliefs—beliefs we can back up by reason as much as possible.

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The secularist view simply ignores the long tradition of reason in religion, and plays to stereotypes of believers ignoring or not being concerned about the evidence because such stereotypes are easier to dismiss.

An engagement with great thinkers in religious history and in contemporary times would necessitate secularist approaches becoming involved in a serious debate. My view is that this is a debate the secularist will lose (which is why I think that advocates of the so-called “new atheism,” for example, are afraid to engage in detailed discussions of actual arguments, and prefer rhetoric, and superficial appeals to emotion and stereotypes). My position on the rationality of worldviews is that all worldviews are “faiths” to some extent, that a faith must be rational in order to be taken seriously, especially in politics, and that the religious view of the world in general is a rational faith, and more rational than secularism.

Secularism vs. Religion in a Democratic State

This brings us to a second line of argument for keeping religion out of politics. One might be inclined to believe that secularism is a better (more correct, more true) worldview in terms of content. Although they may not always admit it, secularists believe their worldview is superior because it is correct on the major issues. They are free to believe this, of course, but this is where the background assumption of democracy is important. Suppose you are convinced that religious belief is not as rational as I think it is, and that you are prepared to offer a robust defense of the superior rationality of secularism. The problem is that this does not help us with the issue of religion in public life. This is because it is crucial to recognize that it is not necessary for me to convince the secularist that religious belief is rational in order for religious beliefs to have a role in politics; all that is necessary is that I hold that they are rational. And, we might add, that I can convince a significant number of people of this fact, or, more accurately, that a significant number of people (indeed billions more, if we are to compare the two general positions in terms of numbers) are already convinced of this fact, especially if the beliefs are to have any impact on public square debates.

We should not forget the fact that we are not really discussing the rationality of religious belief vs. the rationality of secularism, we are discussing whether religious beliefs can be introduced into the political arena in a democratic society. In addition, the debate about whether a particular belief is reasonable or not, and so about whether or not it could play a role in public and social policy issues, is itself a public square debate. This is a key point frequently overlooked by secularists; they seem to think that if a religious believer and a secularist disagree on an issue, that the secularist view should be the default view! But any type of suppression of a view *before* a public debate is held violates the basic principles of democracy, especially of freedom and equality.

This is why the problem of pluralism is a very difficult problem, and why one might be often tempted to engineer an end run around the democratic process to advance one’s worldview. The problem arises because once one accepts the democratic form of government as a backdrop, and then says “I believe that X is objectively true and should shape society,” one must recognize that, however one may not like it, one is only speaking for *oneself* on this matter, and that others may have a different view. Part of the meaning of freedom in a democratic context is that you cannot speak for someone else on these matters. Moreover, democracy in theory supports the expression of different views on various matters (though it does not always work out this way in practice). The best solution to the problem of pluralism then is to have an open, full and honest public square debate on the issues of the day, and then to vote on them. This is not a perfect solution because we must accept that sometimes the majority can get things wrong, and logically just because a consensus emerges on a certain issue it does not mean that the consensus is correct. However, this is a better solution than the other two main alternatives. One is to appeal to the High Court in various countries to settle various contentious issues in society. This approach is very popular in the United States, where the most controversial issues in contemporary culture have not been settled democratically, but by decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court, even so serious an issue as abortion. But the problem with this approach is that it turns the Courts into yet more political bodies, which people try to manipulate for their own political ends (this is why there is a big political fight every time there is a vacancy on the U.S. Supreme Court, and why everyone involved in the debate now describes various justices as “liberal” or “conservative” as a matter of course). Another possible way to solve the problem of pluralism is to appoint some smaller (elite) group to deal with contentious matters, say by recommending policy decisions or options to the government. But the problem with this approach is obvious: the make-up of the group will be susceptible to political influence, and, from the philosophical point of view, it would

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involve a minority deciding key issues for the majority. How can this be better than the majority deciding? One might argue that the minority are more “enlightened,” but this argument simply raises again the problems we have already considered.

Is the State Neutral between Worldviews?

This brings us by way of conclusion to the question as to whether the state is neutral between worldviews, and promotes no worldview itself, as liberal political philosophers claim? It should be obvious that the state is not neutral, and cannot be neutral. This is because many of the laws of the state embody moral values, and these moral values enshrine in law key beliefs that are held by various worldviews, for example, beliefs about justice, equality, peace, freedom, the common good. These values clearly appeal to those three general areas of belief that form the substance of a worldview, the nature of reality, the nature of the human person, and the nature of moral and political values, and they are among the foundational beliefs of various worldviews. In addition, those who do not agree with these values (or more usually with specific interpretations of these values) are excluded from *practicing* their worldview on these matters by the state. For instance, those who believe that some people are not equal to others cannot practice this view in hiring for a job. As Richard John Neuhaus has noted, “...the public square will not and cannot remain naked. If it is not clothed with the ‘meanings’ borne by religion, new ‘meanings’ will be imposed by virtue of the ambitions of the modern state.” Political philosopher Charles Larmore admits that the liberal state does not aim at *complete* moral neutrality. It tends to be neutral only with regard to controversial conceptions of the good life and *not to all values or norms whatsoever*. The problem is that those norms and values it is not neutral toward will be used to *restrict* various versions of the good life that the liberal political philosopher does not approve of, and so Larmore’s point begs the very question at issue. In short, the liberal political philosopher is never totally neutral toward key values in the philosophical, moral and political debate concerning how society should be organized politically—there are always some values that are not doubted, and that, more crucially, are then used to *restrict* other views.

It is important to recognize that *coercion is always going on in political society*, and it is impossible to find an individual or worldview not trying to impose at least some beliefs on others. And values that become the basis of law always influence the society as a whole, especially when their effect is considered over time. We must recognize, however, that not all views can be accommodated, and so some people will be profoundly disappointed, and disgruntled. This disagreement must be handled with the utmost care. One of the reasons debates in modern democratic states have become more contentious is that, as more worldviews gain prominence, many of which conflict with one another, a difficult transition has been required from a monolithic leaning society to a pluralist one. This transition has not been handled well, and the result is an increasing polarization of worldviews, and a growing belief that reasonable disagreement is no longer possible on some questions. This can lead to a tendency to regard one’s opponent as morally wrong, even as morally evil, leading to a tendency to vilify him or demonize him.

Lastly, it is possible to take an optimistic or a pessimistic approach to the problem of pluralism; the optimistic approach holds that dialogue can be fruitful; the pessimistic approach is motivated by the view that dialogue is no longer possible, and so we are engaged in a political fight, rather than a philosophical argument. Even considering all of the issues very carefully, in what is a quite complicated topic, it is hard to predict which one of these approaches will prove closer to the truth in the future in the modern democratic state.

Further Reading

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Kent Greenawalt, *Private Consciences and Public Reasons* (Oxford U.P., 1995).

Robert Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

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Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge U.P., 1987).

Brendan Sweetman, *Why Politics Needs Religion: The Place of Religious Arguments in the Public Square* (InterVarsity, 2006).

Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Harvard U.P., 1995)

About the author:

Brendan Sweetman is Professor of Philosophy and Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at Rockhurst University, Kansas City, Missouri, USA. He is the author or editor of ten books, including *Religion and Science: An Introduction* (Continuum, 2010); *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel: Epistemology, Human Person, the Transcendent* (Rodopi Press, 2008); *Why Politics Needs Religion: The Place of Religious Arguments in the Public Square* (InterVarsity, 2006); *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology* (Oxford University Press, 1992); *A Gabriel Marcel Reader* (St. Augustine's Press, 2011); and, most recently, *Philosophical Thinking and the Religious Context* (Bloomsbury, 2013). He was consulting editor for the *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement: Ethics and Philosophy* (Cengage Gage, 2013, four vols.). He has published more than a hundred articles and reviews in a variety of journals and collections.