

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION OR FREEDOM OF RELIGION? QUESTIONING THE POSSIBILITY OF RELIGIOUS NEUTRALITY IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract

Democracy has become the most popular form of government in the contemporary world order. Aligned to democracy is the requirement of being religiously neutral in politics for which many countries of the world -especially in the West- would prefer to be described as a secular state. This is irrespective of the general pledge to a freedom of religion. Yet if we accede to the fact that humans order their lives according to their worldviews and that religious beliefs provide a very basic worldview from which humans order their lives, it becomes impossible to sustain the argument for the possibility of being religiously neutral in the political sphere. This is so, because the religious worldview is a type of worldview that is life-regulating based on its conception of reality, of the human person, and of moral and political values, expressed through rituals and practices. Conversely, secularism is itself, also a worldview that is not unbiased. Like other worldviews, especially religious ones, secularism contains beliefs about the nature of reality, the nature of the human person and the nature of morality, which has political implications. Worthy of note is that the quest for secularism, requires supplanting the religious worldview with the secular worldview. Given the above, this essay argues that the projection of the secular state is crisis ridden. The paper recommends that a more sustainable arrangement would be to acknowledge our religious biases and seek a point of convergence between competing worldviews, religious or otherwise in the political sphere.

Introduction

Today's world, besides being described as a global village, as a cosmopolitan society, as a world pursuing democratic values, as being in thrall to consumerism and mass communications, as the triumph of individualism, could above all be described "*as a world of ideas*." ¹ According to Brendan Sweetman, today as never before, aided by information technology and the spread of democracy and freedom of expression, the world is awash in a sea of ideas often divergent and sometimes convergent. ² These plethora of ideas contribute to the necessary pluralism of the modern society in both the intellectual, moral and political spheres. It is the case that any sustainable political arrangement today must take cognizance of this pluralism. This implies that while not necessarily imbibing all cultures (an impossibility), it recognizes and respects the fact that these cultures – whether expressed religiously, politically, morally or otherwise – arise from a conception of reality or worldview, and are the basis for the meaning and purpose in the life of the people that practice them.

The above affirms that human action and indeed any sustainable religious, political, moral, etc. practice arises from a worldview. This position is clarified by Sweetman when he distinguished two aspects of a worldview, "the outer edges of a worldview (where we would look at its theoretical justification and structure) and the center of a worldview (where we would look at its practice)." ³ This underlines the fact that while at the level of practice, one may not be conscious of it, human actions often (or maybe always) have ideological basis.

The above is a preference for pluralism. Pluralism here is also understood as a worldview and entails a subscription to any worldview that tolerates and values the existence of other worldviews as well as being open to a healthy debate between worldviews. ⁴ In the midst of the myriad of ideas and worldviews in the modern world, without doubt, there is the risk of an ideological

confusion. One of the consequences of modern-day pluralism is, therefore, the increased difficulty for people to be ethical and to live deeply meaningful lives. Nevertheless, that pluralism is possible, is privileged on the fact that worldviews that are pluralistic “value, as part of their worldview, free speech, rational, open discussion and debate, and the search for truth and understanding. And, as John Stuart Mill noted, even if one strongly believes one’s view is true, it can still be strengthened and invigorated in the clash with error.”⁵ A worldview that is pluralistic is therefore one that places emphasis on freedom, equality and justice.

We merely intend to argue here that diversity well managed enriches, instead of being a ground for conflict. This is because – relying once more on the distinction by Brendan Sweetman – while the outer edges of a worldview (its theoretical justification and structure) may conflict, there is often agreement at the center of worldviews (the emergent practices). It was on the same premise that Robert Audi argues that agreement in normal practice does not require agreement in moral theory,⁶ making it possible, for instance, for two people to agree on a moral position, based on arguments from contrasting worldviews. Therefore, the globalized world of today has the particular advantage that we are enriched and stand a better chance of articulating a better ideal of religion and politics.

The above advantage notwithstanding, there is still the high risk, of being lost in the diversity. This is because the plethora of ideas does not necessarily imply the possibility of an emergent unity by itself. As such, any unity therein must arise from a human construction and discovery. Indeed, many have characterized modernity (or post-modernity) as being in a state of flux, of being characterized by constant and radical changes that overthrow all traditional grounds for stability, a situation reminiscent of Marx’s qualification of modernity as “all that is solid melts into air.”⁷

A particular human construction is the emergent requirement for the institution of a secular state as part of modernization in politics. This is historically necessitated. For, if a society must maintain the diversity of her members, then the preference of one religion over another already destroys this diversity and excludes some members from the commonwealth. Notwithstanding, an understanding of human nature entails that the ambience of religion and politics dovetail and can rarely be separated. This would require a reconsideration of the conceptualization of the idea of a secular state by navigating the very thin line between the “freedom from religion” and “freedom of religion.”

Worldview, Man’s Need for Order and the Interplay of Relativism and Absolutism

One of the characteristic forces of modernization as argued by Max Weber⁸ is man’s need for order, expressed through attempts to domesticate, categorize, and rationalize the world in order to engender a controllable, predictable, and understandable world. Zygmunt Bauman goes further on this and conversely argues in *Liquid Modernity*⁹ that this characteristic need to rationalize the world in search of order (*solid modernity*) is only one face of the coin. He argues that modernity has an ambivalent dual nature: The need for rationalization and order, as well as non-rationalization and the amplification of man’s capacity for constant change (*liquid modernity*), that overthrows all the traditional structures of order. He argues also that modernity has moved from *solid modernity* where we understood ourselves as pilgrims in search of a deeper meaning, to *liquid modernity* where we consider ourselves tourists basking in fleeting social experiences.

To a large degree, Bauman’s thesis captures a predominant experience of modernity. If brought to bear in moral philosophy, the above would give rise to relativism of values. But this situation only arises when the tolerance via equality, freedom and justice, which constitute the hallmark of pluralism, becomes exaggerated.

It is to this degree that one may assent that relativism is both a cause of pluralism and a consequence of it.¹⁰ This will further imply that if one becomes excessively tolerant, there also arises a slip to the point of condoning the action you intended only to tolerate.¹¹

Relativism understood as the view that moral values are not absolute in themselves, but are relative either to the society or to the individual, in the context of the above, constitutes one of the challenges of our modern society as a consequence of pluralism. This comes in the two forms of cultural relativism (that moral values are relative to cultures) and extreme relativism or subjectivism (that moral values are relative to individual idiosyncrasies).¹² While there could be grounds for some form of cultural relativism, subjectivism on the other hand makes objectivity in morals impossible. The modern culture promotes this as a way of authenticity which according to Charles Taylor consists in upholding “that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own,”¹³ and therefore “Only accept what rings true to your own inner self.”¹⁴ Indeed, this form of relativism as subjectivism is the bane of modernity.

However, also as argued by Max Weber, “ultimately life as a whole, if it is not to be permitted to run as an event in nature but is instead to be consciously guided, is a series of ultimate decisions through which the soul – as in Plato – chooses its own fate.”¹⁵ Thus despite the tendency for relativism in pluralism, it must all the same be affirmed that the only sustainable means for any form of ethics, is some ground for objectivity, even if minimal, consisting in some ultimate decisions.

I would therefore uphold that the sphere of politics and religion in the globalized world order must be a sphere in which some basic objectivity of moral values uphold. Within this sphere and despite

the diversities and thus pluralism, the basis for advancement, according to Kissinger, could be said in the following terms:

The unity of things lies beneath the surface; it depends on a balanced reaction between the opposites. The goal of our era must be to achieve that equilibrium while restraining the dogs of war. And we have to do so among the rushing stream of history. The well-known metaphor for this is the fragment conveying that “one cannot step twice in the same river”. History may be thought of as a river, but its waters will be ever changing.¹⁶

It is against the above background that I uphold the possibility of finding a common ground for the interaction of diverse religious beliefs in politics and hence the possibility of a defined secular state.

Freedom of Religion and Freedom from Religion

Freedom of and from religion are two interconnected but distinct concepts, employed exemplarily in the constitution of the United States to enshrine, right of individuals to practice a religion of their choice, or no religion at all without coercion; separation of church from the state; and the requirement that the state remains religiously neutral in all her undertakings.

As distinct concepts, freedom of religion protects religious expression, while freedom from religion protects individuals against religious coercion. Freedom of religion refers to the right of individuals and communities to hold, practice, express, and manifest their religious beliefs without coercion, discrimination, or persecution. It includes the liberty to worship, teach, observe rituals, change one's faith, or hold no faith at all. This freedom protects religion as a positive human good and affirms the dignity of conscience. Freedom from religion, by contrast, emphasizes the right of individuals not to be compelled to participate in religious practices, beliefs, or institutions. It safeguards citizens from

religious imposition, especially by the state, and supports the principle that public authority should not enforce or privilege any particular religious doctrine.

The present world order promotes the coexistence of both the freedom of religion and freedom from religion, ensuring robust religious liberty while maintaining a public space in which no one is forced to conform to religious norms. In essence, freedom of religion protects individuals' rights to practice their faith, while freedom from religion protects individuals from government actions that establish or endorse any particular religion. While the conceptualization of freedom of religion and freedom from religion look attractive, in practice it presents serious difficulties.

The Place of Religion in Politics

One area in which diversity is well manifested in the world today despite globalization is religion. Many conflicts in history have been hinged on the proselytizing nature of religions. While some religions today affirm and practice man's freedom of choice (of religion), others are bent on proselytization, which remains a source of conflict in the international terrain. As a worldview, religion rationalizes reality based on the belief in/that: a supreme being/reality or realities created the universe; a transcendent being or realm; human beings are composed of body and soul and will have existence after the earthly life; human beings have freedom of the will; there is an objective moral order.¹⁷ Religion in this dimension will generally refer to "a set of institutionalized rituals with a tradition and expressing and/or evoking sacral sentiments directed at a divine or trans-divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment and at least partially described by myths or myths and doctrines."¹⁸ This necessarily culminates in the description of religion as "the way in which the special being that is society thinks about the things of its own experience."¹⁹ Within the context of our discussion, and proceeding

from the above descriptions, we will subscribe to religion as a type of worldview that is life-regulating based on its conception of reality, of the human person, and of moral and political values, expressed through rituals and practices.

One general characteristic of religion is that, its practices are generally not completely based on reason alone. It extends beyond natural reason to the realm of belief and the supernatural. This feature of religion, no doubt, gives rise to contrasting comprehensive religious doctrines. This is the fact of the present day globalized and religiously plural world. Given also that the peoples of the world, often organize their political and moral lives around their religious worldviews, it goes without saying that religion plays a role in politics. But again, given the pluralism with regard to religious professions in the present-day societies, many countries of the world have adopted the strategy of the separation of religion from politics in order not to deal with the inherent contradictory tenets of the different religious professions found in the same societies. A good example of such a strategy at separation of religion from State can be found in The First Amendment of the United States' Constitution that calls for the Freedom of Religion, the interpretation of which makes it illegal to use religious argument to advance one's position in the public sphere. This position, of course, is a consequence of the conflicts in history arising from religious intolerance. One way of looking at it in our current world setting is the fact that an argument in the public sphere based on evidence from the Bible is more likely to evoke some suspicion from a Moslem, while the same from the Quran will also likely evoke the same sentiment from a Christian.

While it must be acknowledged that the need for the separation of Church and State is based on historical antecedents, it is also true that to some extent, this separation is today exaggerated to the point of being interpreted as "freedom from religion" instead of "freedom

of religion.”²⁰ This is despite the majority of the individuals in contemporary societies ordering their lives based on their religious worldviews. This has given rise to the promotion of secularism. Indeed, many countries today identify themselves as secular States. This position portends that secularism is a religiously neutral position, one that argues only from human reason and does not subscribe to the fundamental feature of belief found in religious worldviews. I will subscribe to the argument that secularism is also a worldview and as such shares in the characteristics of worldviews and therefore cannot be validly promoted as a substitution for the religious worldview. According to Sweetman,

Secularism, broadly understood, is the view that all of reality is physical, consisting of some configuration of matter and energy, and that everything that exists either currently has a scientific explanation or will have a scientific explanation in the future. The universe is regarded as a random occurrence, as is the appearance and nature of life on earth. Thus, secularism is not simply the negative claim that there is no God or that there is no soul; rather, these claims are supposed to follow from its positive theses. Like other worldviews, especially religious ones, secularism contains beliefs about the nature of reality, the nature of the human person and the nature of morality. And many of these beliefs have political implications.²¹

It follows from the above that there will be no justification for arguing for the substitution of religious arguments or worldview with the secular arguments or worldview.

Besides the political implications of the secularist thesis, the claims of secularism cannot be completely explained by reason and science alone. Secularism therefore goes beyond reason and science to make claims that can only be based on belief. For instance, the origin of life, of species and of man cannot be completely explained scientifically nor through evolution. At best it could be claimed that science would in the future arrive at a

complete understanding and explanation of these. But again, this would be a belief and an expression of faith on the scientific methodology. The argument here is that the attempt to push religion out of the political sphere today is a bit exaggerated and is not completely disinterested as it is portrayed to be. Also, given that religion is in many cases the basis for moral arguments, it is doubtful that this can be validly achieved without relapsing to moral relativism.

Naturally, the need for the separation of the church and State arose as a reaction to the historical facts of abuse, whereby religions mirrored the political and otherwise cultures of the time instead of critiquing it. What needed to be done is therefore not to dismiss religion completely from the political arena but redefining its role. Moreover, given as I have argued that religion is one of the worldviews by which people order their lives, I doubt it is possible to completely separate religious views from the political ones. For instance, the argument for the dignity of the human person may not be validly separated from the Christian conception of the human person as a creature of God. Also, it is arguable that democracy as it is conceived and practiced today is an outflow of the Christian religion.²² In the final analysis, it could be said that the secularist perspective is merely substituting the earlier religious perspective without divesting of its errors.²³ As Charles Taylor argues in *A Secular Age*, secularism is not simply the absence of religion, but rather an intellectual and political category that itself needs to be understood as an historical construction, which seem to promote the view that a materialist view is adult; faith in a personal God is childish.²⁴ This way of proceeding often comprises in a recourse to the letters of the law, without also considering the circumstances of the making of the law and the fact that the law in that context is also just a text and therefore a product of history and culture. It proceeds by “the slow replacement of the vertical understanding of society into the modern horizontal idea of rights-bearing individuals related in mutual benefit, a combination of constitutional monarchy, rights

and freedoms.”²⁵ This changes the question from the moral sphere to the legal sphere, without catering for the fundamental moral questions, which could also hinge on some structural injustice. For instance, an effective law against stealing would be more effective if the fundamental causes of stealing were considered in the process of the law. This would be a moral and not a legal consideration. In the final analysis, it remains true that secularism is a shutting out, “The door is barred against further discovery,”²⁶ which is the criticism that secularism actually advanced against religion.

The above serves to underline the fact that the current trend of the promotion of politics without religion is at best not tenable. And yet, it is the effort in this direction that has ensured the lack of consensus among nations on the international terrain. This is because, while some countries especially in the western world have advanced beyond religion in politics, some others could well be described as theocracies. Therefore, even if it were possible to promote the secular State on the national levels, it becomes impossible on the international terrain. Within this perspective, it stands to reason that the only way to advance harmony would be to treat both the secularist and the religious worldviews as just worldviews for the understanding of reality. Justice would therefore comprise in the mutual respect for the freedom and equality of all. Development and harmony by the same token will also entail allowing the different peoples to promote values that they uphold for different reasons whether religious or secularist. Unity arising from such a perspective would therefore be advanced from the search for the intersection of the different worldviews instead of the promotion of a particular worldview and the outright rejection or suspicion of any contending alternative. This, I will also assert, is based on the belief in an objective reality which could be promoted from plural perspectives. Once we promote a world in which no one is barred out for his religious views or otherwise, we will eventually live in a world in which everyone is included.

One area the contravention of the above stand has traction is in the seeming promotion of liberal democracy as a form of government in the international setting. This could be exemplified in the western-backed efforts at regime changes in the middle east and Africa. In recent times, the chaos in Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Syria could be attributed to efforts at promoting western style liberal democracy. The ruins from these attempts speak for themselves in contrast to the status quo ante. Yet, these are undertaken by Western countries that policy wise are vowed to be against any effort at regime change, in sovereign countries.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

So far, we have tried to outline the difficulty of instituting a secular state. The ideal of a secular state rests on the promise of neutrality: that public power can stand equidistant from competing religious and metaphysical commitments. Yet this promise conceals a deep philosophical tension. For law, policy, and public reason cannot arise from a vacuum; they presuppose values, and values inevitably reflect particular conceptions of the good, which as we argued is itself a worldview. The attempt to govern without endorsing any substantive worldview thus risks becoming either incoherent or disingenuous.

Moreover, in plural societies, religion is not merely a private sentiment but a comprehensive way of life shaping identity, morality, and social belonging. To exclude religious reasoning from the public sphere in the name of neutrality often amounts to privileging secular rationalities, which themselves embody specific historical and cultural assumptions. Secularism, then, may function

less as impartial arbiter and more as a dominant ideology that redefines legitimacy in its own image.

The difficulty of the secular state lies, therefore, in balancing two competing demands: the protection of freedom of conscience and the need for a shared moral horizon. Absolute neutrality is unattainable, yet overt partisanship is unjust. The task of political philosophy is not to eliminate this tension, but to manage it through dialogue, institutional humility, and a continuous renegotiation of the boundaries between faith, reason, and power. This opportunity is lost in all efforts at banishing religion from the public sphere.

Endnotes

- ¹ B. SWEETMAN, *Why Politics Needs Religion*, 16.
- ² B. SWEETMAN, *Why Politics Needs Religion*, 16.
- ³ B. SWEETMAN, *Why Politics Needs Religion*, 26.
- ⁴ For more on this See, B. SWEETMAN, *Why Politics Needs Religion*, 220.
- ⁵ B. SWEETMAN, *Why Politics Needs Religion*, 219.
- ⁶ R. AUDI, *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason*, 155.
- ⁷ K. MARX – F. ENGELS, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* in *Marxist Archive Online*, Section 1, paragraph 18, lines 12-14.
- ⁸ See M. WEBER, "Parliament and Government in Germany Under a New Political Order", 130-271 and "Socialism", 272-301 in *Weber: Political Writings*, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- ⁹ Z. BAUMAN, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge UK, 2000. Bauman examines how we have moved away from a "heavy" and "solid", hardware-focused modernity to a "light" and "liquid", software-based modernity. This passage, he argues, has brought profound change to all aspects of the human condition. I read *liquidity* here to imply the difficulty of committing to any one ideal and the preference for savoring the continuously changing universe in multiple spheres.
- ¹⁰ B. SWEETMAN, *Why Politics Needs Religion*, 234.
- ¹¹ Lisa Daley in B. SWEETMAN, *Why Politics Needs Religion*, 246.
- ¹² B. SWEETMAN, *Why Politics Needs Religion*, 235.
- ¹³ C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, 475.
- ¹⁴ C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, 489.
- ¹⁵ M. WEBER, "The Meaning of 'Ethical Neutrality' in Sociology and Economics", in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, 18.
- ¹⁶ H. KISSINGER, *World Order*, 373-374.
- ¹⁷ For details on this see, B. SWEETMAN, *Why Politics Needs Religion*, 18.
- ¹⁸ B. SWEETMAN, *Why Politics Needs Religion*, 47; See also, I. HEXHAM, *Concise Dictionary of Religion*, 186-187; and R.A. CLOUSER, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* for a discussion of religious belief as a theory and the nature of theories in general.
- ¹⁹ E. DURKHEIM – K.E. FIELDS, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 436. See also G. RIST, *The History of Development*, 20. Here he defines

religion as “the belief of a given social group in certain indisputable truths, which determine obligatory behavior in such a way as to strengthen social cohesion.”

²⁰ For a detailed argument on this, see B. SWEETMAN, *Why Politics Needs Religion*, 75. I am indebted to B. Sweetman for the ideas expressed here. Indeed, the argument in this section is to a large extent based on a reading of his book.

²¹ B. SWEETMAN, *Why Politics Needs Religion*, 17-18.

²² I am aware in taking this stand that the Christian religion has also offered support for other forms of governance. For instance, the great catholic philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas did not subscribe to democracy as the best form of government.

²³ See for instance the argument of the secularist perspective in K. NIELSEN, *Naturalism and Religion*, 11. This accords to our earlier description of secularism as a worldview that does not rise above the supposed errors of the religious worldview. For example, the secularist worldview is also intolerant to other worldviews.

²⁴ C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, 563-564.

²⁵ C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, 395.

²⁶ C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, 769.