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“A powerful and carefully constructed argument against the secularists in our midst who are attempting to subvert the traditions that gave birth to our unique national enterprise.”

Herbert London, President, Hudson Institute; author, America’s Secular Challenge

HUNTER BAKER (PhD, JD) is a Christian academic and writer specializing in religion, politics, history, and culture. Baker serves on the political science faculty at Houston Baptist University and has written for a wide variety of publications, including The American Spectator, National Review Online, Christianity Today, and the Journal of Law and Religion.
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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 worshiping 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
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. 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.

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? Perhaps it is this less dramatic but still real threat that secularism will
The End of Secularism

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 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
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.”

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.

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.

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.” 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.
The End of Secularism

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 postmodernism 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
The Non-uniqueness of Theocratic Danger

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?\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{15}

In accord with this framework, Casanova sees an active countermovement 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-
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. 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.
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