Chapter 2

Border Crossings: Secular versus Religious Arguments in the Public Domain

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores some of the core misconceptions about the key concepts central to secularism and their interaction with the realm of religious discourse. In particular, it looks at the supposed hiatus between human rights discourse and religious views of justice with a view to identifying to what extent religious values and secular values are the same or are perceived to be different. For example, why are Reason, Liberty, and Choice assumed to be secular values in the public domain differentiating a secular worldview. Finally, the role of assumptions made by journalists about these issues is discussed as a feature of a mystifying account of religion in the public domain.

INTRODUCTION

Religious and cultural dialogue in the public square takes place, consciously or unconsciously, as a “trialogue” with a third party, secularism in its procedural or programmatic. Secular culture and language implicitly form the background to dialogue between religions. People of faith readily reach a consensus about the threat of “secularism”, often with a circumscribed cluster of issues in mind: notably sexuality, the beginning and end of life, and research on human tissue. More often than not the new brand of militant, programmatic secularity, from Richard Dawkins to Christopher Hitchens, provides them with a rallying point. Disagreement is set aside. A common front forms against a common enemy.

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“Modernism” was a rag-bag of ideas lacking sharp definition that emerged in the period 1890-1910 to become the bugbear of Vatican thinking. Likewise, from 1990-2013, “secularism” has occupied the space vacated by communism - its earlier political epiphany. The reasons and dynamics for the enmity were and are, different. Fears about “modernism” were the product of a beleaguered Church that had lost temporal power and confidence. Today’s fears about “secularism” arise from a blow-back to resurgent religion - associated in part with the need to come to terms with Islam. Contemporary secular reaction derives principally from the impact of religion gaining in confidence and public voice.

This state of affairs has been reinforced by journalists’ indifference to any consistent account of what might be meant by “secularity” or “secularism”, coupled with their highlighting of several disparate features of today’s society as “secular”. This is highly problematic when reports on judicial judgments on religious rights claims become more common. There is little understanding that the product of the American, French and Scottish enlightenments has been significantly different, or that India, Turkey, France and the United States does “secularism” in different ways.

The slow erosion of secularisation theory as the dominant sociological account of the relationship between religion and “modernity” took place over the last forty years of the last century. Peter Berger’s *The De-secularisation of the World*, 1999, marked its demise, just as his *The Sacred Canopy*, 1967, its rise, with the Iranian Revolution in 1979 providing tangible evidence that something was wrong. The same period saw the spectacular global expansion of Pentecostalism and the resurgence of Islamic identities. So we inherit in the second decade of the 21st century a complex, religiously pluralist world in which Europe appears more as a secular exception than the vanguard of an unchallenged modernity.

This has left widespread confusion and vagueness about the meaning of secularism. Does the term merely chronicle “the death of God and the growth of ‘disenchantment’ in the developed world”, the final collapse of the “sacred canopy”? Does it describe the sharp decline in attendance at formal worship in what mainstream religious organizations still like to call “mainstream” but frankly, looking at the size of the other streams, no longer qualifies as mainstream? Is it the dominance of scientific explanation and management discourse in the public domain and the evacuation of concepts of the spiritual and transcendent from the way people see and talk about the world? Is it a belief that there is no directionality associated with the human life, no final Good at the end of the Rainbow?

Or is it a procedural concept, an account of what is widely agreed to be a desirable constitutional and political arrangement designed to avoid, or resolve, inter-religious conflict—with an accompanying historical account of how this arrangement arose as enlightened princes in Europe sought to end wars of religion? Is it programmatic, getting later historically, a renewed commitment to Republican ideals and a shadow anti-clericalism - with perhaps a touch of Nietzsche’s will to power still lurking in the cultural undergrowth - alongside a hidden delight that Prometheus is Unbound? Or more simply, like the offensive description “non-white” or, less so, “non-Catholic”, perhaps it is merely whatever religion is not.

It would help to know precisely what people are talking about when they champion the “secular” especially if they are posturing as its passionate advocates. In much the same