

Talking God: The Legitimacy of Religious Public Reasoning¹

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Why are politicians so hesitant to 'talk God' in public? The article begins by suggesting that this reluctance arises from the false assumption that democracy must be based on public secularism, as if only 'secular reasoning' could show proper respect to our fellow citizens. It proposes that this line of thinking is actually illiberal insofar as it excludes minority voices from public debate. It then sketches a different model of democracy which remains open to as wide range of different kinds of public reasoning as possible, including religiously-inspired ones: it argues for 'candour in representation'. But it concludes with a caution about states invoking religious reasons in presenting public justifications of their decisions. This caution arises not from an acceptance of public secularism but from a recognition of the limits on the proper jurisdiction of the state. States can certainly be profoundly shaped by Christian, or other faith-based, worldviews, but public officials, when speaking on behalf of the state to justify policies, should respect the principle of 'confessional silence'.

Introduction

Why are public figures so reluctant to admit that their stances may be influenced by their religious beliefs? Why would Alistair Campbell, Tony Blair's former right-hand man, feel compelled to insist to the media that 'we don't do God'²? The reason is the widespread acceptance in British public life (notwithstanding the presence of an Established church) of the principle of *public secularism* – the assumption that public laws in a modern, religiously and culturally plural society cannot be justified by appeal to contested religious beliefs like Christianity or Islam but must rest upon principles common to the whole society, namely 'secular' ones. The secularist philosopher Julian Biaggini states the principle succinctly: 'In a secular state, religion becomes invisible at the political level, even when still prevalent at the personal level. Secular governments and politicians do not invoke scriptures or religious authorities to defend their policies. Instead they speak to principles and concerns that all the population can share irrespective of their belief or non-belief'³. The fear is that if this principle is breached – if we allow legislation to be grounded in religious belief – we might be hurtling towards (or back to) something called 'theocracy'. In fact, very few countries in the world qualify as 'theocracies' – Iran and Saudi Arabia, perhaps, but not Britain, and certainly not the USA where the 'religious right' has been accused of seeking to set one up.⁴ But what is the proper role for religious reasoning in the public square in democracies like Britain and the USA?

Two concepts of 'secularism'

A helpful distinction has been drawn by Archbishop Rowan Williams between 'procedural secularism' and 'programmatic secularism'.⁵ The latter intentionally imposes a secularist faith on the public realm and works to privatise religious faith as much as possible, while the former seeks to allow all faith perspectives equal access to the public realm but claims to confer no political privilege on any. The first is a controlling ideology shaping state action while the second is a governmental stance of even-handedness between different faith communities.⁶ Christians will certainly wish to contend with programmatic secularism, but most will broadly support procedural secularism, for it seems to flow from the principle that the state should grant equal religious freedom to all faiths.

The distinction is not watertight, since no democratic procedure can be entirely neutral with respect to rival worldviews. Where a liberal secularist worldview is dominant in the culture, procedural secularism will allow such a worldview to gain public ascendancy. Equally, where a Christian worldview became dominant, procedural secularism would allow Christianity to gain a similar ascendancy.⁷ But it seems clear today that British public life is indeed dominated by a liberal secularist worldview. This doesn't necessarily imply a conscious, militant strategy to force a secularist worldview down everyone's throat – though certainly a minority of secularists seems busy trying to achieve that goal. It does imply, at least, that public debate is *by default* much more open to secularist views than religious ones.

This point is conceded by Julian Baggini, who is a generous-minded secularist, as well as an atheist. On the one hand, he rejects the idea that liberal secularism requires atheism, or that the former should privilege the latter: 'secular neutrality applies as much to atheists as [religious] believers. Just as it is not acceptable to premise a political policy argument on the teachings of the Bible or the Koran, so it is unacceptable to argue for a public policy on the basis of God's non-existence'. Thus far he is endorsing procedural secularism. Yet he goes on to acknowledge a crucial asymmetry in the deliberative circumstances of atheists and religious believers:

[R]eligious vocabulary has been absent from public discourse in a way in which atheist vocabulary has not. A secular discussion of human rights, for example, is couched in terms which both the religious and non-religious can accept. However, there are few distinctly atheist beliefs or concepts this discourse must admit, while there are rather more religious ones it cannot include. So although secular discourse is not the same as atheist discourse, it is closer to the natural mode of expression of atheism than to that of religion.⁸

Quite so. We might say that secular discourse helps inculcate into public debate a 'practical atheism' – not necessarily a rejection of God's existence, only of God's relevance for human affairs like politics.

Given this systemic bias in British public discourse, it is essential to strive for as level a playing field as possible among rival worldviews as they speak into the public realm. This will involve working much harder than we currently do not to exclude

certain voices – including religious ones – from full participation in democratic discourse. This is surely a basic requirement of the equal respect citizens owe to one another.

What does 'equal respect' require?

Yet it turns out that one of the biggest obstacles to creating such a situation is a serious misunderstanding on the part of liberal secularists of the very concept of 'equal respect'. The liberal secularist argument is deceptively appealing and goes like this: if we are to address our fellow citizens with equal respect, we will only speak to them in a language they can understand. We will refrain from appealing to reasons we know they cannot accept. Since we know that most citizens will not accept the validity of religious reasons, these must be kept out of public debate. No law or policy can be justified by appeal to such contested beliefs. They must be confined to the private sphere. On this view, 'religious public reasoning' is a contradiction in terms: if reasoning is truly 'public', it cannot possibly appeal to something as particular and partisan as religious belief.

The assumption, of course, is that 'secular' reasoning is public in a way that religious reasoning is not. But this simply isn't true: reasons given for laws or policies which appeal to a secularist worldview such as, for example, utilitarianism, actually alienate many. And they alienate not only religious citizens but also 'secular' citizens who adhere to some different secularist worldview, such as radical feminism or Marxism. In a society which has become deeply morally and religiously plural, there is no longer any universally shared public language that everyone can equally appeal to in the confidence that all their fellow citizens will understand and accept it. Public discourse has itself become 'pluralised'. In such a situation, religious reasoning has as much right to be heard in democratic debate and to shape democratic outcomes as any other form.

One important implication is that what counts as 'public' reasoning is not determined by the *content* of the reasons given but by the *context* in which it is uttered and heard. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, for instance, was certainly engaging in public reasoning when he appealed to the Christian doctrine of the 'image of God' in humans as his decisive reason for the abolition of apartheid legislation. Given his context everyone knew exactly what he meant. Equally in the UK, given the extent to which the historical influence of

Christianity is still visible in the public culture, most people will be able to understand (if not agree with) Christian citizens who appeal to, for example, the notion of the 'sanctity' of life or marriage (or, today, perhaps even the environment) in public debate.

The principle of 'equal respect' among citizens is hugely important. It is a crowning achievement of modern constitutional democracy. While in the past Christians have often flouted it in one way or another, today most recognise it as having solid biblical and theological grounding. It does not imply a comprehensive egalitarianism but rather the equal right to speak in democratic debate and the equal right to vote on democratic outcomes. (It also implies the equal obligation to accept those outcomes until the issue is opened again.) The subjects of equal respect are, of course, *persons*. But here liberal secularism engages in a sleight of hand: it proposes that we should somehow show equal respect to *reasons*. On the contrary, reasons in public debate should get exactly what they deserve – which may be praise or blame. To impose a restraint on reasons that are motivated by religious faith is arbitrary and illiberal. It has the effect of either silencing religious speakers, or – if they persist in 'talking God' – of branding them second-class citizens.

Candour in representation, restraint in decision

I suggest that a Christian view of democratic debate instead supports the idea of 'confessional candour' – honesty about our deepest motivations in political debate. Such a view will not straightjacket political debate by imposing arbitrary limitations on it but will defend maximum space for the expression of divergent forms of public reasoning (including reasoning inspired by, e.g., liberal secularism, radical feminism, deep ecology, Islam, etc.). Such a Christian view will also support minimal but robustly enforced legal and procedural limits on such public reasoning (e.g., laws against slander or incitement to violence; or, in Parliament, the 'rules of the House').

Once we have accepted this basic principle, it then seems arbitrary to exclude appeal to religious reasons *at any point* in democratic debates – including both the reasoning of citizens in the public sphere but also that of elected representatives in Parliament, local Councils, and so forth. Of course, it will often not be opportune or prudent or relevant to appeal to religious reasons. Indeed, *that will be the normal state of affairs*. But to exclude such reasons *a priori* is undemocratic.

Equally, such an act of exclusion will prevent the expression of dissenting views which might turn out to yield suppressed insights or imaginative solutions to which 'conventional political wisdom' is blind.

Yet there comes a point in the democratic process where debates among elected representatives cease and a political decision is taken, whether by an elected chamber or a government (e.g., a Council or Cabinet). At that point, I suggest, a valid principle of restraint on reasons does after all apply (to *both* 'religious' and 'secular' reasons). Elected representatives may legitimately be influenced by faith-based motivations in their stances on policy and may declare those motivations, but when the time comes for public officials (ministers, civil servants) to offer public justifications of the state's decisions to citizens they must speak to and for the whole political community. They must respect the principle of 'confessional silence'. The point is not to deceive the public about whatever motivations may have shaped a decision. If the principle of 'confessional candour' has been respected in debate, those will be plain for all to see. The point is that the state is not authorised to adjudicate on the truth of faith-based reasons; doing so falls outside its (divinely given⁹) jurisdiction. This is certainly not to argue for a neutral state or a secular state, but it is to argue for a *limited* state: one which humbly acknowledges that its legal authority does not extend to making judgments on the truth of the various faiths represented among its population. This is a significant restraint, but its aim is not to close down Christian influence on politics. On the contrary, if the principle of confessional candour is recognised, there will be ample opportunities for a wide and deep penetration of Christian ideas into law and public policy if Christian citizens are prepared to take them.

Conclusion

The model of democratic debate sketched here offers no guarantee of easy or stable political consensus; our deep moral and religious pluralism seems to make that very unlikely. The question for Christians – indeed for everyone – is how we can negotiate our way through such pluralism in a genuinely principled way, remaining faithful both to our deepest faith convictions and to our political obligations as responsible citizens of a constitutional democracy. The Christian journalist Paul Vallely underscores the immensity of the task to which we must rise:

The key question is can we now find a way of creating something positive and healthy from this crucible, or are we sleepwalking into an age of confrontation and blind defensiveness.... We need to do something more than contain or translate that which we fear and do not understand. We need to find a balance which maintains the secularist separation of church and state but which allows the thinking and acting of religions to play their part in shaping the post-atheist culture which is forming all round us. It is the search for a new political language, and it is a massive and vital task.¹⁰

End Notes

1. This article is a précis of *Talking God: The Legitimacy of Religious Public Reasoning*, an 80-page report published by the public theology think tank Theos (London: Theos, 2009). The article is published with their permission. Copies of the report are downloadable from www.theosthinktank.org.uk Printed copies can be ordered from Theos or KLICE.
2. On this, see Nick Spencer, *‘Doing God’: A Future for Faith in the Public Square* (London: Theos, 2006).
3. Julian Baggini, ‘The rise, fall and rise again of secularism’, *Public Policy Research* 12.4 (2006), 204-212.
4. For a discussion of the many confusions surrounding ‘theocracy’, see Nick Spencer, *Neither Private Nor Privileged: The Role of Christianity in Britain Today* (London: Theos, 2008), chapter 1. Iran and Saudi Arabia may qualify as ‘theocracies’, but the USA, with its strict constitutional separation of church and state, does not.
5. Rowan Williams, ‘Secularism, Faith and Freedom’, lecture delivered at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Rome, 23 November 2006. www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/654
6. The former has also been called ‘secular fundamentalism’: Tobias Jones, ‘Secular fundamentalists are the new totalitarians’, *The Guardian*, 6 January 2007; the latter has been termed ‘inclusive secularism’: The Parekh Report, Commission on Integration and Cohesion, *Themes, Messages and Challenges: A Summary of Key Themes from the Commission for Cohesion and Integration Consultation* (June 2007), 13.
7. That would then amount to a ‘Christian secularism’ (a concept explained much more fully in *Talking God*).
8. Baggini, ‘The rise, fall, and rise again of secularism’, 207.
9. To claim that this limit is given by God is, of course, a large and contested one! It is elaborated further in *Talking God*, where further sources on which I rely are also cited. For a contrary view, see David Field, ‘Samuel Rutherford and the Confessionally Christian State’, in Chris Green, ed., *A Higher Throne: Evangelicals and Public Theology* (Nottingham: IVP, 2008), 85-120.
10. Paul Valley, ‘Private spheres, public squares’, *Third Way* 31.5 (June 2008), 17. By ‘secularist separation of church and state’, I take Valley to be alluding to ‘procedural secularism’.

For further reading

- Stephen Clark, ed., *Tales of Two Cities: Christianity and Politics*, IVP, 2005.
- Duncan Forrester, *Beliefs, Values and Policies: Conviction Politics in a Secular Age*, T & T Clark, 1989.
- Chris Green, ed., *A Higher Throne: Evangelicals and Public Theology*, IVP, 2008.
- Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft, eds., *Jubilee Manifesto: a framework, agenda, and strategy for Christian social reform*, IVP, 2005.
- Nick Spencer, *‘Doing God’: A Future for Faith in the Public Square*, Theos, 2006.
- Nick Spencer, *Neither Private Nor Privileged: The Role of Christianity in Britain Today*, Theos, 2008.
- Roger Trigg, *Religion in Public Life: Must Faith Be Privatized?* Oxford University Press, 2007.

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