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Secular Fundamentalism and Democracy

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This article critiques the view, which may be termed *secular fundamentalism*, that democracy requires religious arguments and religious believers to be excluded from political discourse. Two objections are raised against secular fundamentalism: First, it is premised on a flawed reading of the historical record that assumes religion and democracy are incompatible; second, it falsely assumes a stark division between religious (irrational) and secular (rational) reasons. The article goes on to propound a democratic model of church-state relations, premised on the "twin tolerations" and priority for democracy. Finally, it is suggested that, in certain polities at least, stable democracy may require a religiously coherent rationale.

Religious believers who organize collectively and who publicly advance arguments that rely on religious premises are often accused of engaging in inherently undemocratic political action. This article seeks to refute that charge, arguing instead that regimes that entrench secularism and exclude religious groups from participation in politics are not truly democratic. In what follows, I seek to establish that the intellectual framework that stipulates that religious believers ought to be excluded from politics is an absolutist doctrine that is inconsistent with a democratic interaction between church and state. As a dogmatic worldview that fails to respect democratic values, including the importance of compromise, insistence on strict secularism is a form of fundamentalism. For that reason, I refer to the view that religion should have no place at all in political life as "secular fundamentalism."

Richard Ekins

The Tenets of Secular Fundamentalism

Secular fundamentalism is an ideological framework that stipulates a particular relationship between church and state and, to its adherents, justifies actions taken to enforce or institute that relationship. Specifically, the framework provides that for secular reasons religion should be excluded from political life. This means that the state should not act on religious reasons or enforce religious purposes. Further, religiously motivated persons and groups should not participate in political affairs unless they are prepared to set aside their religious convictions and rely on secular considerations. In this way, the state is to be secular in status and operation.

As a broad school of thought, secular fundamentalism embraces outright hostility to religion, as well as the more narrow view that religion must be excluded from politics for the sake of the polity. The former approach held sway in most socialist authoritarian states in the twentieth century, while the latter has been advocated by both Western liberals and third world autocrats. It is the latter view with which I am concerned, particularly the modern variant that "responds to religious pluralism by restating the moral principles of state-neutrality and secularism and by defending the complete separation of state from organized religion as the preferred or even the only morally legitimate institutional solution."[1]

Differences appear among secular fundamentalists as to whether, in order to maintain such a relationship between state and religion, the state may legitimately regulate the operation of religion in the private sphere or repress political activity by religious groups. Thus, while there is unanimous agreement that the state must be secular, there is division over the means by which religious political activity is to be precluded from endangering the secular state. This division is explored below.

Many leading liberal political philosophers, such as Audi, Macedo, and Rawls,[2] have argued that liberal democracy requires state conformity to a moral principle of strict secularism. Likewise, certain leading democratization theorists, such as Huntington and Rustow, argue or assume that secularism is a condition precedent to democracy.[3] As Stepan has observed, "analysts [often] assume … that a separation of church and state and secularism are core features not only of Western democracy, but of democracy itself."[4]

The common assumption that strict secularism is a necessary condition for democracy is based on the following (mis)reading of Western political history.

It is a historical fact that modern representative democracy emerged in the Christian West. However, it is commonly asserted that the great advance of

Western political thought, which followed the bitterly fought religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was to isolate and marginalize that Christian heritage from politics. This is said to have been achieved by insisting on a strict separation of church and state, confining the former to the private sphere, and allowing only secular concerns to determine the operation of the latter. Such a separation is assumed to have been prompted both by the observation of the destructive effects that religious divisions can have in a polity, and by the recognition that there is a distinction between rational reason and nonrational faith. These twin developments, it is said, led the enlightened rational elite to drive a wedge between religion and political power. In this way, it came to be accepted that political decisions would be made on the basis of reason rather than faith.

This liberal reading of history, from which secular fundamentalism is derived, provides that distinguishing religion (and faith) from politics (and reason) gave intellectual coherence to, and gained political support from, the American and French Revolutions. As is well known, the American Revolution led to the adoption of a constitutional form of democracy characterized by a prohibition on state religion. In France, the revolution gave rise to the use of state power in outright opposition to religion, giving a decidedly secular face to successive, eventually democratic, French regimes. These political upheavals are assumed to have cemented secularism into the framework of Western political thought, thereby establishing a necessary, albeit insufficient, condition for eventual democratization.

From this historical account, secularists derive certain conclusions as to the nature and political effects of religion. The first conclusion concerns the character of religion and religious reasons. It is clear that religions are transcendental worldviews that claim insight into the truth about humanity's relationship to the divine. They therefore necessarily make a claim for absolute truth and consider alternative religions to be false, misguided, or incomplete. Secular fundamentalists assume that the Enlightenment demonstrated a clear distinction between rational secular reasons and irrational, or nonrational, religious reasons. They then assume that the great age of human progress, in which both science and modern democracy were born, came when the West separated church from state and began to rely on reason rather than on faith. Thus, it is said that religious reasons for action are irrational, and that a modern democratic state can exist without recourse to faith.

The second conclusion is that because religious reasons are nonrational they are inaccessible to citizens who do not accept the religious framework from which they follow. This, it is said, provides two further reasons to support

the strict exclusion of religion from political life. As members of the polity disagree, often fundamentally, over questions of religion, they cannot accept the capture of the state by the opposing religious viewpoint. Such a capture would provoke a violent response, destroying the underlying consensus that is necessary to preserve and sustain a democratic framework for action. Thus, for the sake of peace and stability, we need a method to live together despite our religious disagreements. That method, according to the liberal consensus, is to isolate religious disputes from the scope of legitimate political discussion, relying instead on secular concerns and reasons in the political sphere. In other words, the state is to be secular, and religious groups may not participate in political society. Only by making religion nonpolitical in this way can we insulate the state from the corrosive effects of religious division.

Modern liberal theorists have also argued that respect for the equality of citizens, which is presupposed in a democracy, proscribes the use of state power on the basis of reasons that are inaccessible to some citizens. That is, we must utilize public reason and advance our political arguments from within a consensus of generally accepted values. This "public reason argument" essentially means that contested worldviews, such as religions, must be excluded from the scope of political discussion: They are inaccessible and therefore intolerable in a democracy. Instead, our political exchanges must be conducted on the basis of and in the language of secular concerns, as only this is neutral among competing concepts of the good life and shows equal concern to believers and nonbelievers.[5]

The final conclusion drawn from this reading of Western church-state history concerns the nature of religious believers and the danger they pose to the body politic. Because religions are comprehensive worldviews, it is said they naturally tend to attract fanatics who will not accept limits on their authority when in political office and will be tempted to resort to violence to impose their views on others. This is illiberal and undemocratic. Therefore, religiously motivated groups constitute a standing threat toward democratic government as they will always hope to institute theocracy, and will do so if the secular state is not well protected.

It is for these reasons that secular fundamentalists contend that democracy requires the strict separation of the state from religion and the exclusion of religious believers and religious reasons from democratic deliberation.

Political Implications

Secular fundamentalism is taken to require and justify particular aspects of a democratic regime. It clearly supports the emergence of a political culture in

which recourse to religious sources of authority is criticized as impermissible. Such moral restraints, however, are insufficient. The secular fundamentalist also enjoins specific constitutional entrenchment of secularism. This legally proscribes wayward political decisions made in reliance on religious reasons and prevents challenges to the secular status of the state. Moreover, political parties formed on the basis of religious identity should be closely scrutinized and banned if they deviate from the secular norms of the polity. Similarly, individual politicians should be monitored and excluded from political life if they rely on religious reasons for action or are too closely affiliated with religious groups.

As noted above, secular fundamentalists are divided as to whether the state may legitimately intervene in the private organization of religious groups in order to preclude problems arising on a political level. Western liberals often oppose such intervention, viewing it as being inconsistent with the existence of an autonomous private sphere; modern secular forces in the developing world tend to be more willing to use state power for such preventive purposes.[6]

This, then, is the ideological framework with which I am concerned. It stipulates that religion ought to be kept out of public political discourse for the sake of democracy itself. Whether religious contributions to public life are inappropriate by reason of their potential for discord or because of their inherent irrationality, secular fundamentalists agree that democracy requires secular reasoning to be decisive in the public sphere. Thus, liberal democracy is said to require the control and suppression of the political manifestation of religion.

The Empirical Reality of Church-State Relations

The case for secular fundamentalism rests on a reading of Western political history that is flatly contradicted by the present-day reality of democratic political practice throughout the West. While Western polities did make major advances toward the emergence of stable democracy when they instituted minimal levels of religious tolerance and removed certain controversial questions of religious doctrine from the political agenda, this did not require or connote a strict separation between church and state or the exclusion of religion and religious groups from political life. This is evident from the fact that most European democracies continue to have a state religion and many of the major political parties in Western democracies are explicitly based on religious identity. Religiously motivated groups and individuals also continue to comment on state policy on the basis of their religious convictions.

The conclusions that secularists derive from the history of church-state relations not only ignore contemporary Western practice but also overestimate the

efficacy of the Enlightenment in discrediting religion as a source of public values while relying on a distortion of American political experience. The U.S. Constitution did successfully proscribe the formal establishment of a state religion. However, for most of the nineteenth century this did not preclude de facto cultural dominance of Protestantism, nor, more importantly, did it mean that religious views and values were excluded from the public sphere—far from it. The democratic character of the American regime at that time did not rest on its successful suppression of religion, although doubtless a high level of religious tolerance did enable a heterogeneous community to live peacefully when that might not otherwise have been the case.

American politics has always been characterized by the use of religious values in public deliberation, and the campaigns to abolish slavery, prohibit alcohol, and institute civil rights were all driven by religious groups who made explicit and highly effective reference to Christian values. In the late twentieth century, religiously inspired groups and individuals have continued to participate in the political process, and while some restrictions on their political agenda have been imputed from the constitutional prohibition on religious establishment, there has been no comprehensive exclusion of religion from the public sphere. This empirical reality cannot negate the argument that ideal democracy requires secular fundamentalism, but it certainly does debunk the claim that the exclusion of religious believers from politics was a historical precondition to the emergence and consolidation of democracy in the West. That simply was not the case.[7]

Secular fundamentalists are in error when they assume that the rise of religious tolerance in the West, and the concordant isolation of certain highly controversial religious questions from the political agenda of certain Western states, meant that reason had triumphed over faith. On the contrary, these empirical changes in Western political practice, the distortion of which leads to the claim that secular fundamentalism is a precursor to democracy, were grounded in religious doctrine and justified in religious terms. For example, John Locke's famous "liberal" argument for religious tolerance depends entirely on religious premises.[8] It was an argument from within the Christian tradition as to how Christians ought to deal with those with whom they disagreed. To misconstrue this as reason and secularism coming to dominate the public sphere in place of faith and religion is to ignore the terms in which political discourse was undertaken.

Secular Reasons and Religious Reasons

Secular fundamentalism claims that a preference for secularism has to be entrenched into the framework of democratic states because such entrenchment enables the state both to be neutral among competing controversial religious views and to avoid political decisions being made on the basis of inaccessible and irrational religious reasons. Obviously, this presupposes that secular reasons are rational and uncontroversial, and that religious reasons are irrational and controversial. This, however, is not true. Moral reasoning proceeds from controversial premises, and no argument can avoid "dependence, conscious or unconscious, on indemonstrable first premises, over and above the presuppositions of reasoning as such."[9]

In other words, in reaching conclusions about how we ought to act, we have no choice but to reason from "indemonstrable first premises," to use Budziszewski's phrase. Some of these premises may be secular, others may be religious, but they are all taken on faith or assumed for the sake of argument. It cannot be said that secular premises are never controversial. Consider, for example, the uncontroversial, and explicitly religious premise that we should do unto others as we would have them do unto us,[10] and the controversial secular premise in utilitarian theory to the effect that maximizing utility is the ultimate good. It is unsound to simply assert a dichotomy between the secular and rational and the religious and irrational.

This means that the public reason argument cannot justify an entrenched preference for secularism. Certain religiously grounded values, such as the claim that persons are entitled to equal treatment, may be accessible to almost all members of the polity, while some secular values will not enjoy such currency. Moreover, in practical deliberation, decisions cannot be reached without recourse to values that some citizens will find controversial or objectionable. The public reason model itself presupposes values of equality and the capacity for autonomous choice, yet even these values have their detractors.[11] If we were to make decisions on the basis only of universally accepted values, then there would be almost no possibility for constructive political discussion.

Citizens are not disrespected when their fellows advance political arguments on grounds that they find inaccessible, so long as efforts are taken to express the arguments civilly and to render them intelligible. In political discourse, disagreement extends to premises as well as to the process of reasoning whereby we derive conclusions.[12] We cannot escape this by postulating some model of decision-making on the basis of universally accessible reasons, nor should we try to do so.

The fact that secular premises are not necessarily more (or less) rational or uncontroversial than religious premises also undermines the claim that a preference for secularism is neutral among competing religious claims. In fact, secularism is neutral only to the extent that it is equally hostile to all religions, regardless of doctrinal or sectional difference. The claim could be that this approach is neutral between atheists and believers, but again this is false; by excluding religious values from democratic deliberation *a priori*, secular fundamentalism clearly gives preference to the values and beliefs of atheists over those of the religious.

Exclusion of religious groups cannot be justified on the grounds of neutrality, and "religious cultures and identities are not treated fairly by declaring that religion is a private matter or by excluding religious argument from political or constitutional debate."[13] Attempts by the state to deal with competing religions with equal respect, or social agreements (whether consociational or otherwise) that seek to depoliticize certain religious issues, have a much better claim to be attempting to institute neutrality among competing religious views. Enforced secularism, which rules out religious concerns and values by fiat, is not a form of state neutrality.

It follows that the arbitrary exclusion of religious concerns and values from political discussion is undemocratic. Entrenched secularism cannot be justified on the grounds of neutrality among competing views because it is not neutral—indeed the very point of the approach is to ensure that the political process generates only certain types of outcomes, those that are not premised on views that secular fundamentalists find objectionable. The democratic rules of the game cannot be formulated on the basis of such reservations. While this is not to suggest that there are not real political advantages in religious groups' (and others') accepting certain restraints on the questions and issues they seek to resolve in the public sphere, it does mean there is no ground for the comprehensive exclusion of religion from politics. Religious groups legitimately perceive such exclusion as an affront to their dignity and as a denial of the political equality on which democracy is premised.

The "Twin Tolerations"

Having rejected secular fundamentalism, I now turn to the question of how a democracy ought to structure the interaction between church and state. It is clear that religious fundamentalism, wherein radical religious groups seek absolute political power to impose their agenda, is incompatible with democracy. Theocracies may be as authoritarian as secular autocracies. Democratic

church-state relations must avoid both forms of fundamentalism. This is best achieved by institutionalizing two concepts: the twin tolerations and priority for democracy.

The first concept, the twin tolerations, has been advanced by Stepan and refers to the respective room for autonomy that the state and religion must acknowledge for each other.[14] This is not synonymous with a simple notion of separation whereby the state operates in the public sphere, which is sealed from the private sphere. Instead, it starts from the premise that the polity acknowledges a distinction between civil and religious authority. That is, even if there is an established religion with state involvement in the religious hierarchy, the two sources of authority are regarded as being distinct and making separate claims on their adherents.

Instituting the twin tolerations requires a number of concessions from the state and religious groups respectively. At a minimum, the state must respect religious freedom to worship. The reasons for this are clear. To those who accept its precepts, a religion makes fundamental demands on the human conscience. Therefore, where believers are denied freedom to conform to their perceived religious obligations, they will view the state as tyrannical and illegitimate. A democratic regime that is committed to respecting human dignity and equality, and that hopes to secure popular consent, ought not employ state power to frustrate persons from complying with the dictates of their conscience. This is necessary to ensure principled support for democratic regimes and, as such, is both sound strategy and a moral imperative.

Further, civil authorities must be prepared to tolerate religious persons' or groups' organizing politically and participating in the democratic process. Religious believers must enjoy the same freedom as other persons to engage with the state through available political channels. Thus, they may legitimately critique state policy on religious grounds, lobby for change in reliance on religious sources of authority, and argue for particular state action to enforce or respect their beliefs. This is consistent with the freedom to participate that every other citizen in the polity is entitled to enjoy; it cannot be disrespected without arbitrarily and unjustly excluding a class of citizens from the democratic community, and it is just such exclusion that is antithetical to the democratic ideal. In a democracy, religious political action and argument should not be ruled out by fiat.

From the religious, the concept demands toleration of the religious freedom of other citizens, as well as respect for the legitimacy of the state and its autonomy to set policy and act unfettered by religious veto. Thus, religious groups must accept that the state has authority to determine the rules for action in the

polity in accordance with its own procedure, and they must abide by the decisions that it makes. This is necessary if there is to be a meaningful forum for democratic deliberation and a focus for democratic action. A regime in which the state had no autonomy independent of religious control to assess problems and determine solutions would not be democratic. To be clear, this does not mean that it is undemocratic for the religious sensibilities of the voting public to effectively control the scope of state action through the democratic process. It does mean that religious hierarchies should not have power, formal or otherwise, to veto state action or to exercise influence in gross disproportion to the voting weight held by their adherents.

In short, there can be no artificial exclusion of religious groups or religious reasons from the political process, nor can there be *a priori* limits on religious activity, save that it be peaceful and respect the democratic framework. Conversely, religious groups must refrain from seeking to fuse civil and religious authority. This does not preclude the establishment of a state religion, provided citizens are not compelled to worship and it remains possible to disestablish religion. The framework stipulated by the twin tolerances is a minimal set of requirements that must exist if a regime is to be democratic. Thus, while there may be good reasons to agree to remove certain religious questions from the political agenda, beyond the requirements of the twin tolerances these self-restraints may be prudentially desirable, but they are not conceptually required by democracy. Therefore, within the twin tolerations "there can be an extraordinarily broad range of concrete patterns of religion-state relations in political systems that would meet our minimal definition of a democracy."[15]

Priority for Democracy and Religious Obligation

Compliance with the twin tolerations is desirable in part because it helps to secure priority for democracy. This latter concept refers to the state of affairs where all political actors, including believers, accept that the political decisions that result from the democratic process are to be respected and obeyed even if they are inconsistent with the actors' own preferred policy outcome or view of how the polity should be ordered.[16]

Thus, the concept provides that religious groups must continue to abide by rules and decisions that are inconsistent with their religious convictions, and secularists must respect state action that is informed by religious norms and values. That is the price to be paid for living in a democracy. The political equality of all persons means that where we disagree over controversial questions of value, and where we need a decision, we agree to be bound not by our

own comprehensive worldviews but rather by the outcomes of the democratic procedures that are fundamental to the regime.

Ideally, of course, we seek to develop consensus, or, at the very least (as consensus will rarely be obtainable), we endeavor to communicate our political claims, sourced as they are in rival worldviews, civilly, and intelligibly. That is part of the discipline that political actors must learn to operate under if democratic politics are to persist over time. The deliberate alienation and marginalization of opposing political views, as secular fundamentalists advocate in respect of religious believers, can only undermine the support that is necessary to maintain democracy.

This discussion, and the very notion of priority for democracy, raises the serious question of why a rational actor would willingly abide by the results of the democratic process when those outcomes are inconsistent with his or her comprehensive view. The question is especially pertinent with respect to religious persons whose commitments are asserted as fundamental requirements and who cannot as readily be swayed by appeal to secular values. That is, while we might accept as rational the decision of a secular group to settle for its second-best outcomes when pursuit of its preferred outcome would be counterproductive, it seems difficult to conceive of religious individuals' making a similar calculus. There seems to be something inconceivable about treating transcendental and absolute claims of access to divine truth as defeasible.

The apparent puzzle of securing religious support for democracy can be unpacked by considering the distinction between the external perspective held by an observer of religion and the internal perspective held by an adherent to the religion. From the perspective of the social scientist observer, or nonreligious political actor, it might seem that the best way to secure religious support for democracy is to seek to weaken the strength of religious conviction and instead substitute prosperity or a desire for peace and social harmony in place of religious objectives. This might succeed in dulling calls from within a religious tradition for the repudiation of democracy. However, it is equally true that, if the religious group's support for democracy seems inconsistent with its own theology, this constitutes a resource that may be used by elements within the tradition to reject democracy. This is the threat posed by religious fundamentalism.

To survive, democratic regimes require the principled support of believers (among others). This means the religious must view democracy as intrinsically rather than instrumentally valuable. In other words, democracy must be seen to have a moral value in its own right, independent of the extent to which it enables the religious group to secure its political goals.[17] For principled support

to be rational, believers must have sound reasons from within their tradition to justify their support for democracy. Such reasons might relate either to the affinity between democracy and religious freedom or to the implications of a religiously grounded notion of human equality. When harmony exists between the tenets of the tradition and the principled support of the devout for democracy, this provides a strong foundation for the democratic regime. Historically, this is consistent with the rise of democracy in the Christian West, just as tolerance has its roots within the Christian tradition.

Truly democratic regimes are characterized in their church-state relations by the twin tolerations and priority for democracy. Thus, in a democracy, believers are free to worship as they see fit, as well as to participate in public life. The state has autonomy to reach its own policy decisions and authority to implement those decisions without being constrained by religious veto. In this way, while there is no strict wall of separation, political actors observe a distinction between civil and religious authority and give priority to the outcomes of democratic procedures, irrespective of their inconsistency with individual or group preferences. To be sustainable, religious groups' support for democracy must be justified from within their traditions.[18] It follows, then, that contra secular fundamentalism democratization may well require explicitly religious arguments for democracy.

Notes

1. V. Bader, "Religious Pluralism: Secularism or Priority for Democracy?" *Political Theory* 27, no. 5 (October 1999): 597, 620.

2. R. Audi, "The Separation of Church and State and the Obligations of Citizenship," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 18 (1989): 259; S. Macedo, "Transformative Constitutionalism and the Case of Religion," *Political Theory* 26, no. 1 (February 1998): 56; and J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

3. S. P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 298–311; D. A. Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy: Turkey's Experience in Historical and Comparative Perspective," in *State, Democracy, and the Military: Turkey in the 1980s*, ed. M. Heper and A. Evin (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), 239.

4. A. Stepan, *Arguing Comparative Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 218. See also A. Stepan, "Religion, Democracy, and the 'Twin Tolerations,'" *Journal of Democracy* 11 (October 2000): 37.

5. A. Phillips, "In Defense of Secularism," in *Church, State, and Religious Minorities* (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1996), 27.
6. In Turkey, the close regulation of the private activities of Islamic groups by the state indicates this tendency: See U. Sakallioglu, "Parameters and Strategies of Islam-State Interaction in Republican Turkey," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 2 (May 1996): 231.
7. This conclusion is confirmed by the experience of democracies outside of the developed world. Of the 110 poorest countries in the world, only nine are free democracies—Benin, Botswana, Bulgaria, Costa Rica, Jamaica, Lithuania, Mongolia, Namibia, and Poland. Yet these polities, with the exception of Bulgaria and Mongolia, are pervasively religious, thus casting serious doubt on any assertion that there is an affinity between societal secularism and democracy: See M. S. Fish, "Islam and Authoritarianism," *World Politics* 55 (October 2002): 4, 23.
8. J. Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke's Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); J. Budziszewski, "Religion and Civic Virtue," in *Nomos XXXIV: Virtue*, ed. J. Chapman and W. Galston (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 49, 54–56.
9. Budziszewski, "Religion and Civic Virtue," 51.
10. The premise in question is a command from Jesus to his followers: See Luke 6:31.
11. Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality*, 239–40.
12. J. Waldron, *Law and Disagreement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 176–77.
13. Bader, "Religious Pluralism," 608.
14. Stepan, *Arguing*, 216–17.
15. Ibid., 217.
16. Bader, "Religious Pluralism," 612–13.
17. Note that this does not mean democracy must be viewed as an absolute moral value. To the devout believer, his or her relationship with God will constitute the highest concern. Democracy must simply be viewed as a form of government that it is possible (and desirable) to support without contradicting the will of God.
18. See further: Stepan, *Arguing*, 229.