
ASCENDENCY OF THE FUNDAMENTALIST SECULAR STATE[†]

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Abstract

Increasingly, the abolishment of the soft establishment of Christianity, as this existed in the United States in the first half of the 20th century, with prayer in public schools and the presence of Christian symbols in public spaces (the Ten Commandments in courtrooms), has been replaced by the hard establishment of a secular moral and political vision. This essay explores this remarkable social transformation. It argues that there has been a failure to recognize that current secular states in the West are not religiously or morally neutral; instead, there exists a salient animus against belief in God. The essay concludes by exploring the secular state's major cultural drive against Christendom as that religion which may not be allowed to reassert itself again. The goal is the establishment of the fundamentalist secular state.

Keywords: Christianity, contemporary secularism, church/state relationship, fundamentalist secular state

1. Introduction

A complex and wide-reaching secularization of culture and law marks the post-Enlightenment West. The dominant secular morality no longer simply affirms a separation of Church and State but requires a unity of state and secular ideology. Christian norms are to be removed from public policy and public discourse. Where the residue of Christendom cannot be straightforwardly removed, there is a commitment to detach the remaining elements of Christianity from any anchor in the transcendent, so as to reduce the remnants of Christianity to mere folk traditions (e.g., Christmas trees and Easter eggs). For example, Christmas can be publicly acknowledged only on the condition that it is considered to be no more than a widely embraced collection of folk customs, not the celebration of the Birth of the Messiah of Israel, the Son of the Living God. Religious discourse is rejected because it can fragment society into profoundly competing moral communities. More fundamentally, however, it is also rejected,

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because the contemporary secular ideology seeks to be after God and without reference to the transcendent. There has been a fundamental shift from the separation of Church and State to the disestablishment of Christianity and the establishment of secular humanism as the official public ideology. This essay explores this transformation. It argues that there has been a failure to recognize that current secular states in the West are not religiously or morally neutral, but rather have a salient animus against belief in God. The goal is the establishment at law of the fundamentalist secular state.

2. The fundamentalist secular state

The language of 'fundamentalist secular state' is meant to capture the way in which the dominant secular morality seeks through law, public policy, as well as standards of political discourse and political correctness, to secure adherence to its specific moralistic tenets. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "fundamentalism" as: "a. A religious movement, which orig. became active among various Protestant bodies in the United States after the war of 1914–1918, based on strict adherence to certain tenets (e.g., the literal inerrancy of Scripture) held to be fundamental to the Christian faith; the beliefs of this movement ...b. In other religions, esp. Islam, a similarly strict adherence to ancient or fundamental doctrines, with no concessions to modern developments in thought or customs." [*Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd edn., 1989, online version December 2011 at www.oed.com/view/Entry/75498, accessed 13 January 2012] An establishment of a religion is here acknowledged as fundamentalist when it is at law accepted and imposed as the only accepted morality, account of moral rationality or the politically reasonable that may inform and structure not only the public forum, but also the public square and major social institutions, such as the family. In a fundamentalist Mohammedan state, Christianity may be introduced neither into the public forum (e.g., public policy debates), nor into the public square (e.g., the public display of icons of Christ, the Theotokos, and the saints). In a fundamentalist secular state, the same is the case, except that enforcement is of a particular secular perspective. In each case, public discourse is required to conform to the established discourse. The fundamentalist secular state requires rigid adherence in the public forum as well as public discourse generally to its core doctrines of liberty, equality, human dignity and social justice. The fundamentalist secular state acts *as if* the particular moral intuitions used to fashion public institutions are in fact true. The state then enforces the secular moral standards by which all social systems, cultures and religions are to be judged. Such standards are taught and adhered to as if they expressed canonical moral truth and as if they established a firm foundation on which derivative moral judgments, permissible law, and public institutions are to be based.

The dominant moralities and political ideologies of the Western world have come to be not merely secular, but often passionately atheistic. There is a growing movement throughout Western Europe and North America, for

example, to undermine the salience of religious discourse, to remove its influence in the public forum, and to erase religious images from the public space. There has been a profound rupture with traditional Christianity, in particular, which secular proponents seek to push into the distant past, as if it had been an unfortunate, perhaps immoral, accident of history. The social goal is to sever the contemporary, secular culture from the Christian culture that had once framed the West. Consider, for example, the passionate rejection of activists to permit in the preamble of the European Union's 2003 proposed Constitution a factual mention of the "Christian roots of Europe" [I. Black, *The Guardian*, May 24, 2004, online at www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/may/25/eu.religion]; or the United States Supreme Court decision in *United States v. Windsor* 570 U.S. (2013), ruling the Defense of Marriage Act, which defined 'marriage' as applying only to heterosexual unions, unconstitutional. In December 2011, members of the United States House of Representatives were even prohibited from wishing constituents a "Merry Christmas" in official mailings [M. Tapscott, *Washington Examiner*, December 16, 2011, <http://campaign2012.washingtonexaminer.com/blogs/beltwayconfidential/congressmen-cant-say-merry-christmas-mail/261466>].

In its moral and ideological commitments, such secularism strives to be essentially different from Christian culture. This collage of secularist movements embodies a laicist zealotry to relegate Christianity in particular, and other religions more generally, to the distant, superstitious and unenlightened past [1]. Such movements are committed to utilizing political and social institutions, as well as fully secular moral constructs to reshape culture and society, rejecting both God and the transcendent [2-4].

3. A Western intellectual synthesis of Philosophy and Christianity

This present-day secular context developed out of the intellectual commitments that framed Western Christianity. As Gianni Vattimo argues, for example, "[T]he West is secularized Christianity and nothing else. In other words, if we want to talk about the West, Europe, modernity ... the only notion we can use is precisely that of the secularization of the Judeo-Christian heritage." [5] The background social shifts and intellectual climate that lead to the High Middle Ages in the West produced a culture with a very different view of proper behavior and human flourishing from the Christianity of the first five hundred years. This Western cultural synthesis rejected a divine command account of moral obligations, embracing instead a philosophical rationalism that produced both a rationally accessible God and a morality justified through human reason. Western culture in the early second millennium became focused on formulating the intellectual framework that became Scholasticism, with its emphasis on Philosophy, especially Aristotle and his commentators, rather than on orienting persons towards mystical union with God. Philosophical analysis became especially salient for Western Christianity as Western European thinkers framed what they presumed would provide a rational unity for the diversity of

cultures which Western Christianity compasses. They hoped for a unity grounded in philosophical reason, rather than in an encounter with God as lawgiver or a Theology dependent on theologians as mystics. The aspiration was for a secular rationality that provided philosophical access to universal moral truths, while also avoiding the sectarianism that would accompany a Christian morality founded on God's revelation. They sought to establish the moral commitments of Christianity through Philosophy and without reliance on the Christian God.

This Western Christian marriage of religion and philosophy was born of a synthesis of Aristotelian, Stoic and Christian thought, which emerged in the thirteenth century [6]. In Paris of 1210, for example, Christian scholars passionately embraced the works of Aristotle published that year in Latin, resulting in a deep fusion of pagan Greek philosophy and Western Christianity. Especially among Western Christianity of the High Middle Ages, as Thomas Aquinas (1227-1274) exemplifies, such intellectual understandings were incorporated into Christian theological doctrine. This auspicious embrace created a faith in reason as steadfast as the prior faith in God. Such a faith in reason made it possible for Western Christianity to play a driving force in philosophy, the genesis of what became the contemporary secular culture. Much of this theological exploration fell under the general rubric of the natural law [7-8]. For example, Roman Catholic theology defends the ability of humans to discern objective moral norms through philosophical analysis and rational argument. As a result, its theology has taken on a decidedly philosophical cast [9-10]. In addition, moral judgments that could not be justified in terms of discursive philosophical rationality were brought into question. Consequently, the Christian West gradually lost the mystical grounding that is central to the experience of God in the life-world of Traditional Christianity.

This emphasis on secular philosophical analysis led to the underlying methodological atheism that now colours the very contours of deliberation regarding morality, public values, and social policy. It shapes what are assumed to be the proper standards of acceptable social debate and moral discourse, appropriate institutional goals and public policy objectives. In contrast, for Traditional Christianity, God provides a final unconditioned point of epistemological reference, a transcendent foundation for knowledge of reality and morality in being-in-itself. One way to appreciate this foundational distinction is to recognize that Traditional Christianity embraces the theocentric, rather than the rationalistic, horn of Euthyphro's dilemma. "The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods." [11] Traditional Christians have long appreciated that God wills the nature and content of the right, the good, and the virtuous independently of any ground in human rationality. This stark divide between the secular and the divine is precisely what one experiences in the gulf between the dominant secular morality that informs the secular fundamentalist state and the traditionally Christian, grounded in the commands of God. Contemporary secularism seeks to

ground morality (and Moral theology) in an account of the secularly reasonable, which is then given priority in the public forum over any direct experience of or commands of God. This ideological commitment is integral to the establishment of the fundamentalist secular state [12].

4. Secular morality is anti-Christian

Contemporary secularism is correct in seeing itself as establishing through law and public policy a moral vision at odds with Traditional Christianity. Consider four brief examples: marriage, abortion, assisted suicide, and charity. Secular morality marks the moral distinction between licit and illicit sexual activity through individual consent. Christians, however, know that the locus of all sexual activity should be within the marriage of one man and one woman. Sexual intercourse and procreation is blessed in marriage. As Saint John Chrysostom reflects: “And how become they one flesh? As if thou shouldst take away the purest part of gold, and mingle it with other gold; so in truth here also the woman as it were receiving the richest part fused by pleasure, nourisheth it and cherisheth it, and withal contributing her own share, restoreth it back a Man. And the child is a sort of bridge, so that the three become one flesh, the child connecting, on either side, each to other.” [13] Christians know that marriage is the mystical union of husband and wife properly directed towards salvation; secular morality views marriage as no more than a consensual partnership, regardless of the sex of participants [14]. The fundamentalist secular state’s establishment of homosexual marriage is a key social element in its campaign to undermine the traditionally Christian.

Christians know abortion to be the murder of a child in the womb. The *Didache*, which dates from the first century AD states: “Do not murder a child by abortion, nor kill it at birth” [15]. Canon 91 of the Quinisext Council (AD 691) states: “Those who give drugs for procuring abortion, and those who receive poisons to kill the fetus, are subjected to the penalty of murder” [16]. In comparison, secular reason appreciates elective abortion to be an integral part of responsible parenting and the equal liberty of women. As the American Civil Liberties Union states: “Deciding whether and when to become a parent is one of the most private and important decisions a person can make. It is a decision that should be made by a woman, her family, and her doctor.” [www.aclu.org/reproductive-freedom/abortion; 17] Indeed, legal limits are urged on the ability of hospitals, physicians, and nurses to refuse to participate in abortion services.

Christians know that death should be approached with humility and repentance, with prayer and confession, with physician-assisted suicide known to be self-murder; secular morality endorses physician-assisted suicide as a potentially good and autonomous choice to preserve personal dignity [18]. Traditional Christians know how significantly murder can sunder one’s heart from its proper focus on God independently of the consent of the persons killed, as in voluntary euthanasia. Throughout one’s life and in the preparation for

death, the practices of Traditional Christianity are a form of spiritual therapy sought through repentance and submission to God's Will; secular reason appreciates religion as, at best, a psychologically comforting practice for those so weak as to need such consolation.

Charity plays an important role in a rightly oriented and flourishing Christian life. Charity ought to orient oneself and others towards Christ. Properly given, charity is provided out of love for another and out of love for Christ. Appropriately received, charity humbles oneself before Christ and binds one to His Church. The origin of charity ought to be love of God. All that we have is from God and everything that we possess is owed back to God. The goal of Christian charity is neither egalitarian social justice nor the creation of the Kingdom of God on earth. Charity teaches one to love others, to love God, and to learn humility and obedience to God. As Saint Theodoros the Great Ascetic (c. 7th) notes: "If you have renounced worldly cares and undertaken the ascetic struggle you should not desire to have wealth for distribution to the poor. For this is another trick of the devil who arouses self-esteem in you so as to fill your intellect with worry and restlessness. Even if you have only bread or water, with these you can still meet the dues of hospitality. Even if you do not have these, but simply make the stranger welcome and offer him a word of encouragement, you will not be failing in hospitality." [19] Similarly, Saint Maximus the Confessor (580-662) and Saint John of Damascus (c. 675-c.749), both urged Christians to appreciate charity as a therapy to sin [20-21]. Rightly oriented, charity changes one's heart, helping one to love others rather than oneself, and to be humble before God.

Unlike political calls for social justice which seek coercive taxation to support welfare entitlements, reinforcing a jealous coveting of the goods and resources of others, the goal of Christian charity must be the salvation of the one who gives and the one who receives. The search for equality and justice fundamentally obscures this cardinal Christian focus by adopting a this-worldly secular moral understanding. Without rightly-oriented love of God, even charitable giving is empty: "And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor ... but have not love, it profits me nothing" (1 Corinthians 13.3). Government taxation to provide welfare entitlements (e.g., taxpayer financed healthcare), is incapable of aiming persons rightly in the struggle towards God and salvation. Such taxation corrupts individuals into supporting secularism and its moral worldview (e.g., taxpayer financed abortion). Properly practiced, charity reinforces the traditional Christian family and enriches the spiritual ties of the Christian community. Alms-giving must be situated within rightly ordered prayer, fasting, and repentance.

Moreover, Traditional Christianity does not recognize the jurisdiction of rational philosophical analysis to call into question the norms of a rightly oriented religious life. As H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr. notes: "... there is no independent scholarly practice either as a Moral philosophy or as an academic theology (e.g., Moral theology) that can bring into question that which one knows religiously. Although the claims of a religiously informed morality can be

at tension with those of a secular morality or with the requirements of Moral philosophy and academic theology, the latter are not accepted as having the authority to reshape the former.” [12, p. 110-111] In contrast, the fundamentalist secular state appreciates itself as possessing the authority to call into question Christianity’s experience of God, right action, and human virtue [22]. Secular fundamentalism seeks ever to undermine the background Christian culture of the West, including changes in common language usage. For example, ‘holiness’ is no longer appreciated in terms of submission to God, but rather as acting in ways compatible with secular judgments of the right or the good. Similarly, the term ‘saint’ is frequently used to designate an “extremely good person”, given current secular moral standards, rather than as someone “who is holy” [*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn., 1989, online version December 2011 at www.oed.com/view/Entry/169847, accessed 26 January 2012]. The goal is to revise Theology and morality in light of changing cultural and social circumstances. Rational individuals, it is presumed, will find any dissonance between secular morality and the religious life as impeaching religious, rather than secular, claims.

5. Conclusions

G.W.F. Hegel was correct: the fundamentalist secular state has become the surrogate for God: “The state consists in the march of God in the world, and its basis is the power of reason actualizing itself as will. In considering the Idea of the state ... we should consider the Idea, this actual God, in its own right.” [23] Without God, reality and morality are severed from an unconditioned ground in being. Without God, all that remains is a plethora of moralities with no definitive reason to prefer one account of the right, the good, and the virtuous over others. At most, a particular morality can be established at law and enforced by a specific state. Moreover, different states actualize different and incompatible ethical ideas; each establishes at law particular socially and historically conditioned accounts of moral reason and moral culture. Without God, there exists no final definitive reason to affirm any particular established morality as rightly embodying social justice, permissible choice, or human flourishing. There exists only individual preference and prudential judgment.

As illustrated, secular morality diverges radically from Christianity. The morality of secular culture is deflated both in terms of importance and normative force. Secular morality only possesses that normativity of being enforced at law and embedded in the public policy of a particular state. Its only normative significance is its legal and political backing. Without an anchor in God, moral matters are radically deflated. The sanctions for immoral behaviour are no more than a prudential calculation regarding the punishment one is likely to receive at law and the likelihood of being caught. There can be no deeper meaning to the dictates of secular morality than as the expression of the individual preferences or prudential judgments of particular persons and groups. The dominant secular moral understanding is, in fact, only that set of moral intuitions around which

there has been a sufficiently effective political coalition so as to succeed politically in having it established by the state. The common secular morality is only that particular set of socially and historically conditioned moral norms established at law.

Despite the lack of foundations, ideologically driven secular worldviews may falsely claim to be able to establish how one ought in secular terms to act *sub specie aeternitatis*. The sweeping normative claims of secular worldviews (e.g., human rights discourse) and particular secular philosophers (e.g., John Rawls), for example, often give the rhetorical impression that their views bind moral agents as such. Though such robust claims regarding the capacities of reason lie at the foundations of Western morality from the Scholasticism of the later thirteenth century to the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant, they are unjustifiable in general secular terms. This faith in rationality led to the emergence of a moral philosophy that now aspires to create a canonical list of secular human rights in lieu of obligations established by God, despite the collapse of the secular moral philosophical project [24]. Where the mark of a traditional religious moral understanding is a discourse regarding one's obligations to God, including commands regarding duties to one's neighbor, secular morality attempts to secure a discourse of human rights, human dignity and social justice; a project which has failed [25]. The prominence given to the discourse of human rights and social justice, and its substitution for a discourse regarding obligations to God, despite its failure to establish a canonical moral perspective, is a mark of the post-Christian, indeed post-religious, age and of the triumph of the secular culture.

The secularism of the contemporary post Christian world, whether captured by the human rights social political agenda or Rawlsian political 'justice as fairness', routinely functions at the level of mere ideology. It involves a Nietzschean will to power, in which the secular state affirms its own moral political authority to impose its particular moral worldview without actual legitimacy. Indeed, the fundamentalist secular state is highly jealous. It is committed to marginalizing belief in God and to undercutting traditional religion and culture. As illustrated, it is committed to removing Christianity and Christian discourse from the public forum, thereby sundering it from the public sphere, and further enshrining the fundamentalist secular state.

Secularism seeks to be fully after God; it has no desire to find common moral ground with Traditional Christianity. The now dominant secular morality, established and advanced by the fundamentalist secular state, has led to the realization of a fully secular ideology. In the West, the fundamentalist secular state is now in ascendancy. The common morality is now the morality established at law and in public policy. The fundamentalist secular state, with its establishment at law of a particular secular morality, seeks to be all-encompassing, to define the right, the good and the virtuous, so as to restructure society and human relationships, in terms of its particular understandings of liberty, equality and human dignity. No area of life exists outside of the long arm of state authority with its established secular ideology. Even family life and the

raising of children are subject to significant state regulatory activity [26-28]. Central human relationships are to be transformed so that each embodies the particular established understandings of human rights and social justice [29]. In this fashion, the secular moral understanding becomes the secular equivalent of an established religion. Hegel rightly recognized that the secular state has usurped the place of God.

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