

# Competing Views of Secularism: Religion in Democratic Public Space

A Response to Professor Christo Lombard

Thank you, Professor Lombard, for a most interesting, illuminating lecture. And thanks to you, too, Professor Paul Babie for the opportunity to respond. Although I regularly reflect on the Hebrew Scriptures, I have no formal, academic competence in interpreting them, so this evening I will leave aside that element of Professor Lombard's paper. But I have reflected a great deal on religion's place in the contemporary West, and especially on how the church might best engage society today, so as to fulfil its mission of proclaiming the gospel. As a consequence, I will respond to the set of issues raised at the end of Professor Lombard's paper, where he states (in my paraphrase) that modern western democracies have an *impulse by means of law and state to put religion on the margins of public life*. I want to propose that this marginalization, although present to different degrees in many western polities, occurs most obviously in the Republic of France, wedded to its concept of *laïcité*, as Christo has pointed out, excluding religion to a large degree from public life. I want to draw out some of the limitations of this stance but, at the same time, consider the challenges that a religious perspective addresses to any view of secularism. I am assuming here that none of us want to return to the medieval "Christendom" worldview, if a return were indeed possible. Of course, the Christendom worldview made an immense contribution to Western culture, and was imbued with an incarnational spirituality. Nonetheless, it carried within it limitations that I believe neither the churches, nor society in general, should desire to live with ever again.

## **Secular Democratic Societies and the Challenge of Pluralism**

Western culture today is flushed with a plurality of religious and moral perspectives.

Not only does the diversity of perspectives continue to expand, but you and I are

able to resonate with people whose perspectives differ markedly from our own, and even to feel moved to respect those whose stances we don't fully understand. The basic political principles of liberal democracies govern our common life in the light of such diversity. Yet although these principles have garnered a great deal of acceptance (again, I'm assuming that none of us wish to return to a medieval worldview) nonetheless, as Professor Lombard indicates, significant challenges remain. The fundamental challenge is the equitable management of religious and moral diversity. States face this challenge in various ways, dependent on the social and ethical conflicts experienced and the state's institutional arrangements.

Examples abound, perhaps the most persistent and prominent being the debate in France between 1989 and 2004 over whether Muslim girls may wear the *hijab* or headscarf while attending state schools.<sup>1</sup> In the heat of the debate (July 2003), President Chirac appointed the Stasi Commission to report on issues associated with *laïcité* or secularism. Of the commission's many recommendations only one related to clothing but the public debate continued to focus on headscarves. In identifying what lay behind this protracted tension, U.S. anthropologist John Bowen observes that many French citizens saw their conception of the Republic threatened. Their anxieties went "beyond racism and xenophobia (not that these are absent) to fears that the emergence of a public Islam challenges the particular institutions that guarantee life together in the Republic—a public space from which ethnic, religious, and other characteristics are erased."<sup>2</sup>

The debate over headscarves was strongly influenced by its cultural context: France's distinctive view of *laïcité*. In other nations, the management of moral and

<sup>1</sup> On this issue, see the highly praised John R. Bowen, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and the Public Sphere* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2007). For a fine study of this issue from a philosophical perspective, see Cécile Laborde, *Critical Republicanism: The Hijab Controversy and Political Philosophy*, Oxford Political Theory Series (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Bowen, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves*, 246.

religious diversity has also proved challenging. Strong public debate was provoked by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams's lecture to the Royal Courts of Justice in February 2008. Williams discussed how the British legal system could accommodate religiously plural claims, and he raised the example of *sharia* law.<sup>3</sup> The ensuing debate extended to the Australian media and centred on the relationship between *sharia* and British law. Canada, the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, Turkey, and India have all struggled to manage competing conceptions of the world and of the good in recent years.

It's not possible to consider any of these examples in detail here. However, I want to pursue the more general question of how liberal regimes can best approach the task of managing religious and moral pluralism. This has been a central concern of contemporary political philosophy, recently discussed in terms of the nature of secularism.<sup>4</sup> The work of a seminal thinker, John Rawls, provides a good framework within which to examine the question. In his late major work *Political Liberalism*, Rawls develops a view of liberal regimes that has gained significant agreement among political theorists.<sup>5</sup> He assumes that citizens of contemporary democracies hold a plurality of reasonable yet incompatible moral and religious perspectives, or what he calls "comprehensive doctrines."<sup>6</sup> He argues that liberal states must be neutral toward citizens' comprehensive doctrines. Of course, liberal regimes are built upon fundamental values about which states are not neutral—human rights,

<sup>3</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury, "Civil and Religious Law in England: A Religious Perspective," <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1137/archbishops-lecture-civil-and-religious-law-in-england-a-religious-perspective> Accessed January 3, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> See especially: Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 2011); and Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, & Jonathan VanAntwerpen, eds., *Rethinking Secularism* (New York: Oxford University, 2011), particularly the chapters by Craig Calhoun, Rajeev Bhargava, José Casanova, and Charles Taylor. Recent special issues of journals have been devoted to secularism: "The Religious–Secular Divide: The U.S. Case," *Social Research* 76, no. 4 (2009), and "Does Religious Pluralism Require Secularism?" *The Hedgehog Review* 12, no. 3 (2010). See also: Eduardo Mendieta & Jonathan VanAntwerpen, eds., *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xvi. For Rawls' distinction between reasonable and unreasonable comprehensive doctrines see *Political Liberalism*, 58-66.

equality, the rule of law, and democracy. Yet those values allow citizens to engage with one another from their own diverse stances.

Rawls envisages liberal regimes forming “an *overlapping consensus* of reasonable comprehensive doctrines.”<sup>7</sup> That is, he sees humanists, Muslims, Christians, and others agreeing on the fundamental values of the state—human rights, equality, the rule of law, and democracy—each from their own particular perspective, with their own unique reasons. The fundamental values are shared; the justifying reasons are not. In Rawls’s late view, therefore, states cannot themselves adopt any comprehensive doctrine, whether religious or secular; states must remain neutral towards all comprehensive doctrines.<sup>8</sup>

What happens, then, when tensions arise in liberal regimes on account of the plurality of moral and religious perspectives? How can these best be managed? The common response to these questions turns to institutional arrangements: that is, a solution is enforced by ensuring “the separation of church and state,” “the neutrality of the state towards religions” or some such formula. This is precisely the principle implemented in the French headscarves case. However, while institutional arrangements ensuring the neutrality of the state in these matters will be indispensable, Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor have recently argued that a response solely in these terms often works against the equality of moral and religious perspectives.<sup>9</sup> In the French headscarves case, enforcing the separation of

<sup>7</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 134 (emphasis added).

<sup>8</sup> This is a major shift in Rawls’s thought from the “metaphysical” view of justice in his *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1971) to the “political” view in *Political Liberalism*. The significance of an “overlapping consensus” is discussed at length by Maclure and Taylor in *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, ch. 1.

<sup>9</sup> See: Maclure and Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, ch. 2. See also Charles Taylor, “What Does Secularism Mean?” in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2011), 303-25, at 309-11; and Rajeev Bhargava’s view that the West can learn a great deal about secularism from the Indian experience. He argues that secularism should be understood in terms of states maintaining a “principled distance” in which “the state may connect or disconnect with religion depending entirely on whether the values to which it is committed are promoted or undermined by one or the other way of relating to religion.” Bhargava, “Rehabilitating Secularism,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, 92-113, at 99.

church and state means that Muslim girls cannot give expression to a practice which they see as integral to their faith.

Maclure and Taylor argue that the reality of secularism (the state's neutrality toward a plurality of moral and religious perspectives) is better understood and can be better practised if we see it in terms of two major principles and two operative modes. The major principles are moral principles: equality of respect and freedom of conscience. These uphold the equal dignity of all citizens and each person's sovereignty in his or her decisions of conscience. The two operative modes, the separation of church and state and the neutrality of the state towards religions, are indispensable institutional means of implementing the moral principles.<sup>10</sup> Because citizens possess an inalienable dignity, the state must not identify itself with any particular worldview; it must both separate itself from all worldviews and not be biased against them.

Approaching the tensions of secularism from the perspective of both moral and institutional principles allows a greater possibility of resolution than could be achieved by turning solely to the institutional principles. That's the heart of Maclure and Taylor's argument. Distinguishing clearly between the ends, or moral principles, and their operative modes allows citizens to accurately name what is at stake. For example, a Muslim teacher's desire to wear a headscarf in school should be seen as an expression of her freedom of conscience—that is, an expression of one of the moral principles.<sup>11</sup> Her wearing such clothing has been regarded in some countries as compromising the neutrality of public schools, a facet of one of the institutional principles. There is a clash here between secularism's moral principles and its operative modes. Maclure and Taylor's articulation of secularism does not automatically resolve the dilemma, but it does express more accurately what is at

<sup>10</sup> Maclure and Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> The example is taken from Maclure and Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, 24.

stake; it opens a path to better understanding, and in that way offers a better chance of resolution. This view of secularism recognises the burden borne by Muslim teachers wishing to wear headscarves, and makes room for a discussion about whether such a garment really compromises the neutrality of the state. The complexity of the issue is well illustrated by the fact that two democracies—Germany and England—have resolved the issue of Muslim teachers wearing headscarves in different ways.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Church in a Secular Age**

I am proposing that we come to a view of secularism as the best way of democratic states dealing with the plurality of religious and moral comprehensive doctrines within their borders.<sup>13</sup> Professor Lombard points out that some views of secularism aim to expel religion from public life, and that is clearly true, especially in the case of the Republic of France. But it is not universally so, and I believe that most democratic societies are struggling with the equitable management of religious and moral diversity, as I have already said. In my view, taking account of Maclure and Taylor's major principles and operative modes can aid our discernment.

This raises a further question for people like many here tonight, who find the deepest truth of their lives in the gospel of Jesus Christ. How can the churches be faithful to their mission of proclaiming the gospel in our secular, pluralist context? A key document from my own tradition that addresses this question is the Second Vatican Council's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," or *Gaudium et spes* (1965), to give it its Latin title. Clearly, in the remaining time, I can't spell out this document's view of the church-world relationship in any detail. Yet, it sees the task of proclamation in dialogical terms, ones which I believe engage well with our context. From this perspective: while treasuring the scriptures and the

<sup>12</sup> See Maclure and Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, 24.

<sup>13</sup> For extended reflections on this issue, see the essays in Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen eds., *Rethinking Secularism*.

church's tradition, the bearer of the gospel remains profoundly open to any dialogical partner or partners or governments, wanting to understand her on her own terms. The act of proclamation, then, is an offer to another to consider whether the language of faith makes best sense of existence.

Thank you.

Paper presented at the Pilgrim Symposium 2016:  
Spirituality in Times of Social Change  
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