

Towards Greater Inclusiveness: A Response to Secularist Calls to Exclude Religious Public Reasons

Abstract:

The following is a brief review of the case secularists (as generally understood) have posited with regards to excluding religiously based public reasons from the public political sphere. Two charges against religious public reasons are examined: that religious public reasons cannot be externally validated and that they can promote “irrational” political outcomes. I argue that there are other kinds of public reasons that are not open to external validation that we nonetheless consider to be reasonable and desirable for use in the public political sphere. In particular I discuss peoples psychological dispositions and the idea of “human flourishing.” I next discuss the parenting relationship (or child-rearing) and how the manners in which it is currently conducted can be said to be irrational. If secularists aim to exclude religious public reasons they must also account for how to maintain these other reasonably desirable components to society their account makes tenuous and rife for exclusion in the public sphere.

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My objective in the following discussion is to attempt to flesh out a satisfactory response (or at least a plausible one) to some of the objections secular political thinkers levy against their religious neighbors when conducting public discourse. Specifically, I am interested in the robust academic discussion political philosophers have, and continue to engage in, concerning just conceptions of the public political sphere. For a number of reasons, the types of justifications employed by religious citizens, in supporting public political outputs, are found to be controversial. This partially has to do with terms such as “religion” and “secular” not being universally shared conceptions by scholars in this area of study. Though the paper touches on this problematic academic set of affairs, it is not my central concern. Instead, I take up religious citizens (sometimes) use of supernatural claims / claims of faith in their public political discourse. These claims are often what secular citizens find objectionable and hold ought to be excluded from discourse in the public sphere.

Taking up this matter is important because once we determine exclusion is politically necessary then we concede the fact we are not treating all citizens equally. And, here the dilemma is that equality of treatment seems to be a necessary prerequisite to a just democratic public political sphere. So, if we decide we must treat citizens differently we require a neutrally applicable justification, which applies to all entering the public sphere, in order to hold such an act is legitimate. In developing such a legitimating justification is where I hold advocates for a secular public sphere have failed. In trying to deny religious citizens their appeals to claims of faith, secular citizens in actuality desire a demand on the public sphere that they themselves cannot meet. Additionally, upon further reflection, I contend the secularist exclusionary demand is not one they would truly choose to hold in the first place.

In developing support for the use of religious public reasons, and against the privileged status some ascribe to secular public reasons, I move through two arguments. These arguments show that if we were to follow the secular prescription to exclude religious reasons from the public sphere, to its logical conclusion, we would be required to rule out claims we would prefer to keep. In other words, the secularist line of thought would lead to an intolerable state of affairs for the public political sphere, which no reasonable person would find satisfactory.

My first argument concerns the notion of love and its social importance. Political justifications rooted in notions (feelings) of love seem to be a less problematic kind of public reason than the purely religious variety. This stems from people generally having the capacity to love while not necessarily having the capacity for spiritual belief. Similarly to those who defend the political importance of religious public reasons, reasons deriving from love are also deeply held (identity defining). As such, they motivate individuals to express love-based reasons in the public sphere. Intuitively, such feelings (beliefs) of love are more widely held than religious reasons of a generalized formulation. However, were we to accept political approaches that would exclude religious reasons, in order to maintain consistency, we would be required to rule out public reasons based on love as well. A far more troubling state of affairs since any person worth consideration ought to possess such beliefs (feelings).

My second argument is an extension of the first. Feelings of love often inform the relationships we socially hold amongst ourselves. Indeed, love is often held to be a critical reason in justifying the existence of many human relationships. For my purposes here, the specific relation I consider is that between parents and children. That is to say, I consider the role love performs in the public sphere in justifying relationships that involve raising children. Like religious reasons, love is not an immediately demonstrable human based phenomenon. Additionally, the utilization of love

based justificatory political claims may lead to seemingly irrational outcomes. In other words, if we were to behave truly rationally, would we observe the parenting dynamics we currently observe in the world? Why do we not see neutral (emotionally) third parties raising children? Nonetheless, the inclusion of love in the public sphere is not the sort of reason, reasonable persons, would want to give up.

A Synopsis of the Secularist Approach to Public Reasons

This section takes up different understandings of the terms “secular” and “secularism” that several scholars have utilized. These differing interpretations of secularism, in relation to religion in contemporary politics, have motivated distinct approaches in formulating a just public sphere. Of concern here are arguments regarding how inclusive / exclusive should the public sphere when it comes to claims of faith. These terms remain illusive in academic understanding. I aim to distill down, and then consider, a variant of secularism that is perhaps the most hostile towards religion and the justificatory use of claims of faith. This type of secularism I hold falls in line with what Simone Chambers (2010) has called *militant secularism*. Robert Audi (2000) is a well-known exemplar of this form of secularism. Audi not only holds that religious reasons must be excluded from the public sphere but that religious citizens must translate their claims to secularly acceptable ones.

The purpose of this synopsis, then, is to layout a particularly demanding secular understanding of the public sphere that I contend my subsequent discussion, defending religious public reasons, can overcome. Thus providing, hopefully, a convincing case for why we must be as inclusive as possible towards religious claims (and claims like them) if we strive to establish a just public sphere for political discourse.

“Secular” can be taken to roughly mean an area of thought (cultural attitude), which aims to separate religion (understood as an institution, a specific set of dogmatic beliefs, culture creator, etc.) from politics and society in general (i.e. the public sphere). “Secularism,” then, can be taken to mean the social processes in which this is achieved. Charles Taylor (2007, 2011a) explains the major historical developments responsible for this contemporary outlook include the Reformation and the Enlightenment. In the aftermath of the Reformation secularism came to represent earthly matters, as distinct from the transcendent matters concerning the Church. This redefinition was a strategy undertaken by nation-states to separate themselves from the Church and its authority (literally). The legacy from the Enlightenment was that matters, such as political or normative truths, could be justified through reason alone. Such historical developments promoted the idea that religious belief had little to offer policies of the state meant to apply to all peoples in diverse communities.

Taylor’s interpretation of the history surrounding the divide between religion and the secular is a reasonable one. We can look to other related literatures that seem to have a comparable view of the push towards secularism that has accompanied modernity. In examining the difficulties found in International Relations in dealing with “religion” and “secularism” Toft, Philpott, & Shah (2011) point out the Secularization Thesis. The idea here is that science would, or eventually can, expose the supernatural elements found in religious claims. As science reveals truths about reality and human nature, the thesis holds, conflict and violence inspired by religion should become less common. Toft, Philpott, & Shah note that this has not been the case. Rather, a significant portion of international conflict has religion as a relevant variable. In addition, religious conflicts, like those over sacred spaces, tend to last longer and are bloodier than other types of international conflict. Such facts are what secularists often point to when making calls to exclude religion

This work tells us a couple things. First, and most importantly, religion comprises more than supernaturally inspired dogmatic beliefs and practices. The long histories and culture defining traditions of religions are embedded in a plurality of societies across the globe. This feature of humanity seems to get transmitted to individuals in such a way that for many, their religious commitments are identity defining. The failure to account for, understand, or include such identity defining belief sets seems to play a significant role in the violence we see associated with religion (Juergensmeyer 1997; Seiple 2007). So, for the religious, or those that want to include religious public reasons, secular calls for exclusion only exacerbate problems like violence that are associated with religion.

The second point comes with the recognition that religion is more complex than mere worship of a transcendent being(s). The deeply entwined aspects of religion in peoples' personal and community identities are not merely a source for conflict. Religion also possesses a significant capacity to address and, in many cases, overcome societal ills. Religion can be a pivotal resource in, "destroy[ing] dictatorships, an architect for democracy, a facilitator of peace negotiations and reconciliation initiatives, a promoter of economic development and entrepreneurship, a partisan in the cause of women, and a warrior against disease and a defender of human rights" (Toft, Philpott, & Shah 2011: 8).

This general view is shared by a number of scholars (Wolterstorff 1997; Weithman 2002; Taylor 2007; Chambers 2010; March 2013). So, some scholars have attempted, in various fashions, to preserve the value religion houses by trying to re-conceptualize what "secularism" and "secular" mean. "Refashioning secularism might help to temper or disperse religious intolerance while honoring the desire of a variety of believers and nonbelievers to represent their faiths in public life.

It might, thereby, help to render public life more pluralistic in shape and, particularly, more responsive to what I call the politics of becoming” (Connolly 1999: 5).

One of the most prominent accounts in this effort has been offered up Charles Taylor (2007; 2011b). Taylor views the popular conception of secularism (the militant variant) as being particularly counter-productive for democratic polities. Taylor holds that the requirements of secularism are:

One - No one must be forced in the domain of religion, or basic belief. This is what is often defined as religious liberty—including the freedom not to believe—or the “free exercise” of religion, in the terms of the U.S. First Amendment.

Two - There must be equality between people of different faiths or basic belief; no religious (or areligious) *Weltanschauung* can enjoy a privileged status, let alone be adopted as the official state view.

Three - All spiritual families must be heard and included in the ongoing process of determining what the society is about (its political identity) and how to realize these goals (the exact regime of rights and privileges).

Four – We must maintain harmony and comity among the supporters of different religions and views.

(Taylor 2011b: 18)

For Taylor, this more sophisticated understanding of *secularism* enables a polity to express its most centrally held components to their identity. At the same time, Taylor holds that this also allows equal space in the public sphere for the non-religious.

William Connolly (1999) views this state of affairs in another light than Taylor. Connolly, rather, wants to preserve a position in the public sphere that is neither religious nor secular. We might term this a post-secularist position. Here, Connolly wants to be inclusive towards religious public reasons, as they can foster productive contestation (and redevelopment) as to what a just public sphere even is (engagement). Whatever problematic (epistemological / ontological) commitments religious public reasons may contain are not necessarily disqualifying. For one, secular public reasons may also house problematic political justifications of their own. Wanting to keep the useful public reasons of secularism, even if they are problematic, means for Connolly we

should also keep comparable claims of religion. This intuition of Connolly's I also build upon in my subsequent discussion.

Additionally, even if problematic, religious claims can challenge and open up the public sphere so that it promotes a continually evolving sense of justice that best matches contemporary politics. Connolly says, "No single God, primordial contract, fixed conception of rationality, settled conception of self-interest, unified principle of justice, or practice of communicative consensus sits at the apex or base of an ethos of engagement. It is negotiated between numerous interdependent constituencies divided along multiple dimensions. It becomes possible as a political achievement when many have come to appreciate the contestability of the source of morality they honor the most" (Connolly 1999: 154). On Connolly's account, since what a just public sphere is still up for grabs, religious public reasons are value in so far as they challenge the status quo. The dubious nature of some religious commitments is not immediately relevant in public political discourse.

***Rawls & Habermas' move towards greater inclusion discussion, as a response to such philosophical works [Under Construction]

*Problem with increasing inclusion by redefining secularism is that the new definitions end up being tied to particular paradigmatic philosophical frameworks. The resulting state of affairs, then, are scholars talking passed one another, even though they share the aim of being more inclusive towards religious citizens and their public reasons in political discourse.

On the Development of the Militant Secularist Position

Rather than trying to resolve the dilemma religion presents for the public political sphere by re-conceptualizing "secularism," I move to defend religion from the most hostile form of secularism. This being the militant variety that holds we should totally remove religious public reasons from public political discourse. What results, for such advocates, is a much more empirically grounded kind of public discourse. Problems like the production of violence are side stepped and it seems as if meaningful public agreements can be obtained. However, if a case for

being inclusive towards religious public reasons can stand up to such a uncompromising form of secularism then we should yield a particularly robust defense of calls for prescriptions of encompassing of inclusion.

I think that militant secularism's development has had philosophical success because it has offered contractarian political accounts a useful strategy in attaining the formation of consensus. These accounts require social consensus in order to form just political outputs. Secularism has been a fortuitous development since religious beliefs do not easily lend themselves to the establishment of shared agreements in the public sphere. There exists a plurality of religious beliefs. These sets of beliefs are often incommensurate with one another. The beliefs themselves often rest upon unverifiable supernatural assumptions. Spiritual beliefs are also often a core component to citizens' individual and group identities. The implication of this is such religious commitments are not the sorts of beliefs people are willing to compromise, amend, or revise.

Employing militant secularism in the public sphere has had the advantage of avoiding problematic features of religious beliefs. Arguably, the most important of which is secularism's avoidance of the incorporation of supernatural beliefs into public political justifications. The primary supernatural commitments I have in mind are the existence of a non-spatial, atemporal, omni-powerful, omniscient being(s) in which the entirety of existence is dependent and is the only (or supreme) source of human morality. A public reason, which relies on commitments as just enumerated, cannot foster agreements given the realities surrounding religion just discussed. As soon as one skeptic challenges these beliefs, and asks for proof, the religious have nothing in the way of evidence to offer. What justification they can muster is the colloquial response of, "it's a matter of faith." At best, in light of this response, the inclusion of religious public reasons permits a political framework that collapses into relativism.

This is because, without appeal to “hard” evidence, any citizen can justify any action on the grounds of faith. And, the only way to know what these grounds are is by asking the person who offered the religious public reasons in the first place. Such a state of affairs is rife for abuse and allows any public reason to be justifiable on religious grounds. With everyone conceivably able to offer any religio-political public reason as legitimate, the attainment of shared commitments becomes infeasible. And it is upon shared commitments that consensus building depends. Restricting religious public reasons, especially if they house supernatural commitments, from public discourse is a viable way to avoid this particular dilemma.

Scientific truth, then, provides (arguably) an objective standard with which to ground public reasons. This is to say that when public reasons are grounded in this manner we have, “reason (cause) to believe some political claim to be the case (true).” Given this, scientific truths and evidence have been a convenient resource for secularists to employ. Especially given the fact that public reasons, when derived in light of scientific standards, avoid the political problems religious public reasons encounter. Namely, “science” provides secularists modes of evidence and support that are outside (external) to the individual advancing a particular political outcome.

Public reasons, when tailored in this fashion, are comprehensible justifications with which individuals can begin to build consensus around in the public sphere. Individuals can question and revise public reasons of this sort in a manner that enables reciprocal agreements. Secularists gain the ability to include and exclude claims from the public sphere on defensible grounds when public reasons must meet scientific based criteria. In other words, there is a standard with which to evaluate the legitimacy of claims. Secularists, then, are able to escape the problem of relativism the unrestricted inclusion of religious reasons would otherwise collapse into.

The view I have presented thus far is in line with the account of public reason as advanced by John Rawls (2005) or Robert Audi (2000). Rawls (2005) says, “[O]n matters of constitutional essentials and basic justice, the basic structure and its public policies are to be justifiable to all citizens, as the principle of political legitimacy requires. We add to this that in making these justifications we are to appeal only to presently accepted general beliefs and forms of reasoning found in common sense, and the methods and conclusions of science when these are not controversial.” What we should take away from this is that viable public reasons will be commensurate with the most basic (foundational) scientific truths. In other words, in order to be utilized in the public sphere a public reason must not repudiate well-founded scientific assertions.

Yet, just because a particular scientific assertion is well founded, does that mean it is not controversial? And, what exactly is meant by “controversial” in the first place? Some religious citizens not only reject many basic (uncontested) scientific facts but they also reject the worth of scientific knowledge in its entirety. For citizens that harbor such a view of science, any public political justification that conforms to secularist standards is controversial. So, as presently discussed, the secularist outlook of the public sphere does not afford a significant number of religious citizens the capacity to participate meaningfully in public politics. I next move into discussing where the religious can offer a defense for their political claims in the public sphere.

Emotional States Such as Love as Legitimate Tokens of Public Reasons
[Unverifiable claims]

I next move to show that other intuitively legitimate public reasons also house the same “disqualifying” features religious public political justifications do. That is to say, the disqualifying features secularist hold religious public reasons do. Recall that the critiques levied by the secularist, which concern us here, are how religious claims are supported (through faith) and that such support

advances irrational (entailing unacceptable) public political outputs. I first take up demonstrating how we come to utilize appeals to emotional states in the public political sphere.

The aim of this elucidation is to demonstrate that public reasons based on emotions are held personally, and offered up publically, in an equivalent manner as religious public reasons. That is to say, such appeals also rely on a type of faith in supporting their public implementation. This is the first step in my construction of a counter argument against those that want to exclude religious public reasons. The purpose of which is to demonstrate that for the exclusion of religious public reasons to be in accordance with justice, the exclusion of other kinds of public reasons would also follow as a consequent. Such a state of affairs, I argue, is not something reasonable citizens could ultimately endorse.

A public reason stemming from emotional / psychological states is indeed a claim of faith. This has to do with the manner in which one comes to “know” about the emotional appeals utilize in the public sphere, especially those of other people. Emotional public reasons are entirely self-reported. As such, all others that encounter the claim have no way to externally test the veracity of it. The indirect ways we come to learn that others hold an emotional state can give us cause to “believe” that they do indeed hold it. But I, as separate and distinct individual, cannot be certain what others are feeling or the particular psychological disposition they happen to hold. And, though modern society seems to possess scientific means to beginning to grant insight into the internal states of others, these tools still lack certitude.

I argue that emotional and psychological appeals as public reasons are cornerstones to the public sphere. We can consider this point in another way. A historically reiterated theme for the public sphere, which could be said to be its central purpose, is that of human flourishing or human well-being. What outputs the public sphere produces, that seem reasonable, will at least not be said

to make human life worse off unjustifiably. Public political outputs can be said to promote “the good” of the individual or the group in some capacity. Outputs that clearly promote violence, oppression and domination appear unreasonable on their face and to be strong candidates for public reason exclusion. So, it appears to be imperative to know what human flourishing means exactly. Especially given that there are behaviors we can immediately determined to be contra this desirable state of affairs. And, how do we go about measuring human flourishing in order to justify exclusion of certain political outputs?

I do not want to make the case that religious public reasons do not house problematic features. The public reasons religious citizens present may be unintelligible, inaccessible, or non-shareable to their neighbors. And this is truly a problem if we think justifying coercive acts requires consensus. But religious public reasons are not the only types of public reasons that encounter such justificatory challenges. When it comes to employing public reasons, that stem from self-reported evidence, there appear to be many instances where the reasonable thing to do is include such reasons in public discourse. Those that want to exclude religious public reasons, for lacking the capacity to be externally validated, must then explain how we keep public reasons that center on psychological states or concerns over human flourishing.

Kent Greenawalt (2007: 86) says, “It is extremely hard for any of us to say where reason leaves off and faith, commitment, and acquiescence in traditional patterns of belief begin. Even if a belief arises initially through faith, a person subjects the belief to some rational scrutiny—e.g., was I of sound mind and not dreaming? Most people would be very hard put to estimate just how far their sets of beliefs are rationally grounded, and those who can do so confidently are probably deluding themselves.” The point here is that even empirically grounded public reasons from militant secularists may be less than rational. When advocating for some “better” set of affairs (in terms of

human flourishing) there is nothing objective in the world that makes this the case. What we are really having arguments over are differing sets of affairs that different citizens believe are more preferable than another set. This seems to be to come down to a feeling rather than a fact. So, if we wish to preserve such abstract aims in political discourse we will lack the legitimating justifications necessary to rule out (exclude) religious claims of faith.

The Folly of Excluding Emotional States as Public Reasons: A Danger to Parenthood
[Irrational outcomes]

In this next section I take up the secularist charge that claims of faith lead to irrational outcomes. This observation is meant to be a justification for excluding religious claims of faith from the public political sphere. As with the previous discussion, religious public reasons are not the only kind of public reason this charge can be applied to. Imagine it were the case that a polity wanted to evaluate the ways in which parenting is conducted in its society. This fundamental human association has a far-reaching impact on societies in general, and the life successes of individuals in particular. Because of this, it seems desirable to ensure that “parenting” is being conducted in the best manner possible. Yet, if we look at parenting styles in the world and subsequent outcomes related to those styles, they could be said to be irrational.

Anyone with the biological capacity can become a parent. No justification need be given to the collective in order for individuals to give birth or obtain children. Yet, adding people to a collective will impact all members of the group. No forethought by the person desiring to be a parent, with regard to economic security for instance need be required as well. Yet, lack of forethought and preparation by a parent can be harmful to the child under their care. Such behavior, I posit, qualifies as irrationalities associated with parenthood as we currently observe it. And these irrationalities continue when we consider how the state is involved with this pivotal social relationship.

It could be the case that the central organization of the parenting relationship would be better executed by the state than by the random collection of individuals currently entering into that relationship. For one, the state would have the capacity to ensure that all children have some kind of non-abusive guardian as they grow to adulthood. This could eliminate children being thrown away (literally) to die and the variety of abuses many people face in their formative years. A more equitable allocation of social resources (like education and healthcare) could be afforded to children if the entire society was responsible for their upbringing. All of this, from my perspective, seems to be far more rational than the way in which parenting currently occurs in the world.

Yet, it seems to be the case that how parents feel about their child is a very relevant and reasonable claim they could submit as a public reason defending the parenting status quo. Imagine a poor person is a position where they must defend retaining the custody of their child. One reason they offer to the state to keep their child is the love they feel for and exhibit towards the child. Consider if there was also a wealthy foster family willing to take the child. It does not seem to me that this material condition outweighs the parent's love for the child. Yet, as addressed in the previous section, the parent's love is self-reported; there is no external mechanism to verify truth. The parent's feelings cannot be substantiated in the same manner as the foster family's wealth can. Furthermore, the child staying with the poor parent could be taken to be irrational. This seems to be the case if we think material resources have an important affect of one's ability to flourish.

Conclusion

My aim here was to give those of us concerned with the public political sphere pause when considering secularist calls to exclude religious public reasons. The militant secularist, under the general formulation I provide, can be said to have two critiques against the use of religious based political claims as public reasons. These being that religious claims cannot be externally verified

and that religious public reasons support irrational outcomes. Via a counter argument I have shown that these two critiques of public reason do not only apply to the religious public reasons. Rather, they apply to fundamental components to the public sphere like the idea of human flourishing and the parenting (generally biological) relationships we see in the world today. If we think it is desirable for parents to raise their child, in ways they deem as sufficient, secularist must provide an argument as to why this is the case. If we think that human flourishing, which can only possibly be self-reported, is a desirable political end secularist need to provide an argument why it is distinct from the problematic validation of religious political claims.

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