Does God have a Vote? Faith, Democratic Politics and the Secular Age

A flippant answer to the question in the title might be: if God has registered to vote, God can vote. This comment, though for some a tad impious perhaps, encapsulates a range of questions and presuppositions about how religious people face up to the complexity of being democratic citizens in a secular state. In this article I shall start by trying to define and tease out the historical growth of what Canadian social philosopher Charles Taylor has dubbed the 'secular age',[1] in particular as it impacted on the Christian tradition, with particular reference to Roman Catholicism. Finally, drawing on the thought of philosopher Robert Audi, I present a case for religious engagement in secular public discourse that respects the reality of the secular, pluralist society in which we live.

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The secular social imaginary

Charles Taylor, frequently uses the term 'social imaginary' in his works that look at the emergence of modern secular society. By this he means

> "something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations."[2]

Where many theorists of secularisation look at the phenomenon from 'above' – from the view of elites, or from shifts in policy – Taylor takes a more 'democratic' approach, looking at human worldviews in general.

Secularisation is a term that describes the way in which religion has largely withdrawn from worldly prominence over the last few centuries. Sociologist Jose Casanova[3] indicates that it comprises three elements:

- The differentiation of the secular and religious spheres of life.
- The decline in religious practice.
- The marginalisation of religion to the private sphere, including the end of religious domination of political life.

Charles Taylor[4] sees the retreat of religion from the public space, which he often calls secularity, as a process entailing three stages. First, the religious worldview withdraws from the public sphere. This for Taylor is not simply caused by the rise of the scientific

worldview – which had little impact initially on most people – but is part of a deeper de-enchantment of reality.[5] Where once "[h]uman agents are embedded in society, society in the cosmos, and the cosmos incorporates the divine"[6], the embedding is broken. From the Reformation through the Enlightenment to Modernity and now Postmodernity the "sacred canopy" (to use Peter Berger's evocative term)[7] has disappeared. The world is now human-centred and run according to a range of rational human principles based on reason. This happened, Taylor, suggests initially with an elite during the Reformation who, by promoting the idea of unmediated individual access to God, unintentionally led to a new mentality: "from a hierarchical order of personalized links to an impersonal egalitarian one, from a vertical world of mediated access to horizontal, direct-access societies."[8]

It was also, as Taylor points out, based on a growing unease with the notion of 'providential deism': if science, not direct divine action, explains how things happen, God becomes increasingly transcendent, far away from the swirl of daily life, originator of everything but not really involved. In short a kind of absentee landlord. The result is what Taylor calls the 'anthropocentric shift': the world is now no longer God's but human-centred.

The second stage of this saw the decline of individual religious involvement. As people started "using Reason and Science, instead of Religion and Superstition"[9] to interpret a reality where God was no longer integrally part of the worldview, the 'designer' God of reformed Christianity (that replaced the enchanted God of a previous epoch) started to fade away. Of course, with this growing sense of a scientific worldview, the integrated 'enchanted cosmos' started to fade, and with it the power of organised religion over the lives of, first, elites and later, perhaps as late as the 19th Century, the masses. This alienation of the European masses from the Church was initially linked to church leaders' hostility to democratic movements, only later to 'crisis of faith'. It was also, as Taylor points out, based on a growing unease with the notion of 'providential deism': if science, not direct divine action, explains how things happen, God becomes increasingly transcendent, far away from the swirl of daily life, originator of everything but not really involved. In short a kind of absentee landlord. The result is what Taylor calls the 'anthropocentric shift'[10]: the world is now no longer God's but human-centred.

The third stage, in effect the third type of secularism Taylor identifies, entails the recent shift in many parts of the world away from the assumption that religious belief is the norm. This form began in the 18th Century. Taylor argues:

> "The multiple critiques leveled at orthodox religion, Deism, and the new humanism, and their cross-polemics, end up generating a number of new positions, including modes of unbelief which have broken out of the humanism of freedom and mutual benefit (e.g., Nietzsche and his followers) – and lots else besides. So that our present predicament offers a gamut of possible positions which extend way beyond the options available in the late eighteenth century."[11]

This opening up of multiple possible approaches to making meaning, spread beyond elites to the masses. The result is that no single meaningful discourse is acting as a means to keep moral/spiritual coherence. A non-religious, humanist, morally polyvalent approach has become the default position for society. The growth of a global system and the interaction of Western society with multiple non-European

religious and cultural systems has intensified this and, I would argue, made this polyvalence both inevitable and necessary for congenial coexistence.

This has not meant the suppression of religion as such. Indeed today there has been a revival of religious belief and practice in many places, but no single religion holds sway[12]. Religions exist plurally among a range of other social discourses. Except in places where movements spearheaded by hard-line religions (fundamentalism) have seized control, the resurgence of religion has not overtly led to religious states.

The problem we face is that secularisation and secularity is often confused with overt hostility to religion and a radical commitment to excise religion from the public life.[13] We see this ideology played out in the writings and pronouncements of the 'new atheists' like Dawkins and Hitchens.

Religious belief and Democracy

Hard line new atheists seem to regard the intervention of any religious person in the public sphere with a mixture of fear and loathing. Any religious contribution is for them the beginning of a slippery slope from democracy back into the 'dark ages'[14] of superstition and theocracy. They see the political mobilisation of fundamentalists as a dangerous threat to liberty, science and inquiry. Here one can only agree. The way that Christian fundamentalist groups have campaigned for their agenda in the United States is chilling, particularly when they use the institutions of democracy to impose bizarre Creationist views on school curricula. At their most extreme they have agitated for laws based on 'biblical' (read: literalist) interpretation and discrimination against non-Christians and non-believers. Similarly the rise of conservative movements of political Islam, in countries as varied as Iran and Saudi Arabia, have imposed anti-democratic social values on societies. Similar pressure groups are emerging from the other great religions of the world. At the most extreme, one sees the coupling of conservative religion and political violence in what might be called 'faith-based terrorist organisations'.

Mainstream religion has evolved beyond extremism even if it remains uncomfortable with the secular state, with some sections of it perhaps hoping against hope for a return to the lost enchanted world under a sacred canopy.

Are the new atheists right, then? Insofar as they select the most extreme religious groups and views, they are, to my mind, burning a straw man. Mainstream religion has evolved beyond extremism even if it remains uncomfortable with the secular state, with some sections of it perhaps hoping against hope for a return to the lost enchanted world under a sacred canopy. The challenge has been to generate an effective *modus vivendi* for religious organisations to engage positively and constructively with secular (post)modernity. For religious and secular moderates like ethicist Jeffrey Stout "[e]thical discourse in religiously plural modern democracies is secularized… only in the sense that it does not take for granted a set of agreed-upon assumptions about the nature and existence of God." You can't thus take for granted that "religious commitments have default authority in this context."[15]

However before we take up Stout's challenge we need to first acknowledge that religions have had a profoundly ambivalent, often hostile, attitude to democracy and secularity. This is best illustrated by a potted account of a tradition, Christianity, and one important part of it, Roman Catholicism.

The Christian Church's hostility to Democracy

Democracy should not be seen as foundational to Christianity, though churches today endorse it. There has been a long, turbulent history of mutual suspicion and hostility that has only really in the last two centuries eased into a generally healthy working relationship.

The *Judeo-Christian Scriptures* offer no direct endorsement of democracy. This is unsurprising given that democracy as such did not exist at the time: the political leitmotif was mostly one of kingship. God is King, Jesus is Lord. The early Christians organised along oligarchic lines prevalent in the Greco-Roman world without attempting to change the status quo. Christianity, though multi-class in composition, did not in the first centuries overthrow the dominant order, but Christianised it, and monarchical and later feudal politico-economic relationships predominated. This was brought to the world in the age of colonisation.

Religious minorities did indeed promote more egalitarian – what we might today call democratic – values and practices, drawing political analogies to biblical teachings about human dignity, equality of persons under God, and Christ's rejection of a class/caste system and incorporation of marginalised people (women, children, Samaritans, the ritually impure, the sick, etc).

And what happened to them? They were called heretics, persecuted and killed. From medieval penitential and millenarian movements, through the wars of the Reformation (where Luther sided with the German princes against the peasant movements of radical reformation, and where Calvin quickly imposed a theocracy of sorts in Geneva), through the 17th century religious wars and the English Civil War, democratic Christians were systematically exterminated.

Secularisation and Democracy [16]

What started as an exposure and critique of corrupt church practices (i.e. the Reformation) moved into a critique of doctrine itself, culminating philosophically in intellectual deism and political liberalism that paved the way for the French Revolution, separation of church and state and ultimately modern secular democracy.[17] Liberalism and Romanticism, the two great intellectual movements of the 19th century, can thus be seen as the logical outcome not simply of Enlightenment atheism but as the logical extension of the Reformation into the politico-cultural spheres.

In "On Liberty" (1859) John Stuart Mill summed up the impact of such a movement on religion in politics:

> "Those who first broke the yoke of what called itself the Universal Church, were in general as little willing to permit difference of religious opinion as the Church itself. But when the heat of the conflict was over, without giving a complete victory to any party, and each church or sect was reduced to limit its hopes to retaining possession of the ground it already occupied; minorities, seeing they had no chance of becoming majorities, were under the necessity of pleading to those whom they could not convert, for permission to differ…"[18]

Mill's fundamental principle of liberty – self-protection of the individual from unnecessary and undue influence by society as a whole – expresses deep suspicion of any interventionist state, whether monarchical or democratic, theocratic or secular:

> "If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind."[19]

The next piece in the 19th century puzzle is the notion of Natural Supernaturalism,[20] both a literary cultural movement (Romanticism) and the culmination of the Reformation-Enlightenment movement away from medieval religio-political and cultural cosmology through deism towards modern atheism. Old religious practices and eschatology gave way to an emphasis on this-worldly salvation and humanist theologies that questioned the classical religious system. Much theology became, as John Kent noted, rooted in "the historical approach; the concomitant rejection of Verbal Inspiration theories; anti-dogmatism; the tendency to prefer existentially defined 'religions' to creeds, confessional statements and propositional theology in general".[21] Here too we see Charles Taylor's theory of disenchantment and the rise of expressive individualism in the very discourse of Christian religion itself.

Traditional religion was shaken at its foundations by the

rise of nationalism, socialism and industrialisation. With the rise of communications to serve the latter in particular, small isolated communities that had been locked in a 'total' system including 'folk religion' (the remnants of Taylor's 'enchanted world') were incorporated into larger economic and geographical units. They developed new identities outside the old system – whether as workers, Frenchmen, or through nationalist movements as Germans and Italians. These identities became, for most, primary: in the face of scientific rationalism and modernity, the old religious verities also crumbled.

As secular democratic ideas gained ground, the churches almost universally sided with the *ancien regime*. Some were more explicit than others. A succession of 19th century popes denounced liberalism and democracy as heretical. Pius IX, after the 1848 revolutions in Europe, intransigently resisted the Italian unification and the assimilation of the Papal States became unstoppable. This found expression in the 1864 *Syllabus of Errors*, with its stinging attack on the 'evils' of the 19th century – pantheism, naturalism, absolute or moderate rationalism, indifferentism, latitudinarianism, socialism, communism, secret societies, bible societies, clerico-liberal societies, restrictions on the Church's (or pontiff's) political powers or civil and educational rights, in short the very notion that the "Roman pontiff can and ought to reconcile and harmonize himself with progress, with liberalism, and with modern civilization."[22]

Faced with radical anti-clericalism and socialism, the Catholic Church rather reluctantly endorsed democracy more as a lesser evil than a good that could be drawn out analogically from scripture, tradition and reason.

The pope's political power ultimately collapsed with the final annexation of Rome in 1871. For decades after the unification of Italy popes denounced the constitutional monarchy, threatening any Catholic who voted (or joined a party) with excommunication.[23] Gradually this changed. Faced with radical anti-clericalism and socialism, the Catholic Church rather reluctantly endorsed democracy more as a lesser evil than a good that could be drawn out analogically from scripture, tradition and reason.

Why were the churches uneasy with democracy? I think the reason lay in their (quite justifiable) sense that democratic politics would undermine religious authority. In an era of *cuius regius eius religio* (religion of the ruler dictates religion of the ruled) and notions of the divine right of kings, the social order mirrored the religious order of popes, bishops, priests and 'the rest', with similar notions occurring in protestant traditions, e.g. the monarch as head of the Church of England or Scandinavian Lutheran traditions, the dominance of church leaders in Calvinist states. Not to be of the faith of the ruler was unpatriotic; to call for religious tolerance was to drive a wedge between spiritual and temporal authority, leading to a secular state.

The popes were right in their judgment, but their actions proved futile and alienated them from modern society. The wedge between temporal and spiritual was firmly driven into popular consciousness.

In 1893 Pope Leo XIII introduced what became known as Catholic Social Thought in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, partly an attempt by the church to engage with the wider world. This and subsequent encyclicals were characterised by an appeal to secular philosophical reasoning to provide a common language for discussion. By

calling the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) Pope John XXIII further tried to bring the church into dialogue with secularity, trying to build up common ground with other churches and societies. This *aggiornamento* can be seen as an attempt to bring the church into the new secular reality – dialogue with modernity and the values of democracy and human rights within society. *Aggiornamento* was the Catholic Church's attempt to embrace and engage with the *fait accompli* of the secular age.

Authoritarian attitudes in the Church, and claims to 'special authority' based on anthropologies and certain forms of reasoning not shared by everyone – …have an impact on how the church is perceived…

It was not, however, welcomed by everyone. Many objected that any accommodation with modernity was compromising the faith. This created insecurity and crises of identity. While some churches effectively turned their backs on modernity and retreated from the early 20th century into biblical fundamentalism, the Catholic Church from 1965 onwards became a battle ground between modernisers and restorationists. Restorationism started in about 1968. While promoting a political progressivism that supported political democratisation and economic justice on every continent, the church leadership, no doubt with an eye on Vatican I, centralised ecclesial authority, tightened theological and clerical discipline and remained uncompromising on personal moral issues. This rejection of democracy, as Margaret Farley has noted,

> "awakens old fears (whether fairly or not) of nondemocratic organizations overly influencing a democratic society. It raises suspicions (whether legitimately or not) of hidden agendas, manipulation by external powers, and loyalties not appropriate for participation in a democratic process. Once again, the credibility of the church's political agenda, and its calls for justice, are compromised."[24]

Authoritarian attitudes in the Church, and claims to 'special authority' based on anthropologies and certain forms of reasoning not shared by everyone – though they may have no relation to its socio-political stance in many areas – have an impact on how the church is perceived by the state, by non-Catholics and by many Catholics too.

Redefining Religion's role in Democracy

How then does religion fit into democracy today? Philosopher Robert Audi[25] proposes that in a secular liberal democracy we need to adhere to three guiding principles for church-state relations:

- The *Libertarian Principle*. The state must permit any religion to function, within the limits of civil and criminal law[26] (tolerance). While the state does not necessarily approve of a religion it recognises its right to exist.
- The *Equalitarian Principle*. The state gives no preference to one religion over another (impartiality). In short there is no established church.
- The *Neutrality Principle*. The state should neither favour nor disfavour religion as such (no favouritism).[27]

Such principles should apply in both directions, he suggests: state to church and church to state. This does not apply in a dictatorship where religions may feel compelled to exercise their role in opposing tyranny, but in a functioning democracy where secular structures exist to exercise influence on society. Going through these

structures is the process whereby society, including the religions, can exercise influence on governance.

Audi does not naively presume that there is a disconnection between the political and the moral. Morality and politics are inevitably connected; what he is against is a particular morality imposed on everyone, particularly where such a morality is rooted in a theological set of presuppositions which may disadvantage the exercise of the two foundational ideas of liberal democracy namely personal liberty and basic political equality.

Unlike some philosophers, Audi does not rule out religious arguments but merely insists that they should not be the foundational or sole foundations for a church's political engagement, since they do not necessarily hold the same value for believers as for unbelievers (or indeed, one might add, be shared by believers within a particular church or religious tradition). A religious argument advanced in a democracy has to be conscious of the degree to which its content is founded on a particular religious belief, the way it uses empirical and other evidence to justify itself, its motivation, and the historical pedigree of its argument.[28] Its argument should not simply be based on some 'conversation-stopper' rooted in unverifiable 'divine revelation', claims based on scriptures or doctrines not everyone shares or on claims to the authority of religious leaders. Audi is deeply concerned about many of the phenomena and ways in which religions conduct themselves in trying to pursue their religio-political agenda, including:

- infallible expressions of authority
- condemnatory tendencies
- threats of religious domination
- tendencies towards cults and fundamentalisms
- attitudes of self-importance
- obsessions with outsiders, and
- other features that often prefigure institutional intolerance.[29]

Aggressive, authoritarian expression of a position may result, rather than moderation, prudence and openness to dialogue. Fallibility, recognition of limitations and openness to change are values Audi and other democrats prize. Indeed, they are a *sine qua non* of democracy.

To those who object that secular reasoning as pursued in democracy is fallible because it is human, Audi responds that religious reasoning is equally fallible.[30] Given that one cannot prove that such reasoning, whether from scriptures or authority, is truly divine (unless one accepts it as such) – and only divine for those who share in the particular religion – religious reasoning cannot legitimately be privileged, let alone when religious reasonings are themselves contradictory between and within religions.

There is also the danger within religious reasoning that it bases its secular reasoning on unverifiable religious presuppositions couched in secular language. At best this may simply be naivety on the part of religious activists who cannot see that what they're saying is fundamentally based on faith, not scientific evidence; at worst it may be intellectual dishonesty and manipulation.

Should religion say anything, then? Unlike rabid secularists, Audi thinks they should. "Reason without intuition", he argues, "is at best too formal to guide everyday life" but "faith requires reason to interpret its objects and human life in general; and the traditions most worthy of our attention surely reflect reason in major ways or at least depend on it for their interpretation."[31] Religious intuitions, although not based on cold empirical facts, may offer insights that need to be addressed, may open areas of debate that may be overlooked. But, Audi insists, when dealing with questions of policy, religions should advance arguments that are basically rational and secular in content and form.

A conclusion (of sorts)

Despite the revival of religion in many parts of the world, a revival that some like the sociologist Peter Berger see as a refutation of the secularisation thesis he and others previously espoused, such a revival in democratic societies has not had the effect of turning the clock back. Secularisation, in the sense of a decline in religious belief and practice, may not be as universal as previously thought. But this, Taylor has reminded us, is not the essence of secularisation.

Religious revival and the political power of religion in some places may well be a sign of the *failure* of democratic states in some places – where the state infrastructure is weak, where confidence in democratic governance is weak, religions may even serve as an alternative government. But this is no guarantee that a

change of fortunes – a renewal of democracy, effective governance, economic and social recovery – will not sweep away the 'gains' made by religion. Apart from the moral dubiousness of religions 'cashing in' on human misfortune, this seems merely to be delaying the inevitable. It also disempowers religions by giving them an overinflated sense of self-importance, promotes leadership by power-mongers, and 'de-skills' religions from learning how to cope with living in a democratic environment.

Personally, as one who is both a religious person and a strong supporter of the secular democratic tradition, I am convinced that the kind of approach outlined by Robert Audi is something religious institutions and believing citizens should welcome. In South Africa one sees how Audi's model actually works – in the shape of the Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office in Cape Town, a body formed by the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference to engage with Parliament in policy formulation and debate. Similar groups have been established by the South African Council of Churches and by the Muslim community. Neither anointing the secular nor condemning it, they debate with policy makers in secular terms, albeit informed by their faith traditions. In this, they are robust exemplars of how religions engage with democracy in the secular age.

NOTES

1 Taylor (2007).
2 Taylor (2004), 23.
3 Casanova (1994).
4 Taylor (2007).
5 Intriguingly this was, as sociologist Rodney Stark convincingly argues, largely done within the framework of Christendom. Personal spats between prelates and astronomers aside, Stark debunks the claim that the Church opposed science, arguing convincingly that the rise of science in medieval Europe was the result of theological curiosity about the nature of God's creation. See: Stark (2003), 121-199.
6 Taylor (2007), 152.
7 Berger (1967).
8 Taylor (2007), 209.
9 Ibid. 270.
10 Ibid. 221-269, 290-292.
11 Ibid. 299.
12 Note here Berger's revision of the 'sacred canopy' theory. Cf. Berger (2000).
13 Stout (2004), 93.
14 A myth, argues Stark (2003), quite convincingly.
15 Stout (2004), 99.
16 Parts of this section are drawn on an article I published some years back: Egan (2000), 469-473.
17 Barnett, (1999).
18 Mill, (1961), 261.
19 Ibid. 269.
20 Cf. Abrams, (1971).
21 Kent, (1982), 23-4.
22 Syllabus of Errors (1864).
23 Cf. Kertzner, (2004).
24 Farley, (2001), 215.
25 Audi (2000)
26 How the state may limit religious freedom where it violates civil-criminal law is suggested by McLean (1997).
27 Audi (2000), 32-33.
28 Ibid. 69-75.
29 Ibid. 100-103.
30 Ibid. 138.
31 Ibid. 215.

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