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“Do secular societies provoke religious extremism?”

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Preamble

It is, in one sense, odd that an Anglican bishop should deliver the Acton Lecture because it was the legal Establishment of the Church of England that prevented John Acton, a life-long Roman Catholic, from entering Cambridge University in 1850 and led to his education occurring mainly in Germany under the mentorship of the theologian and priest Dr Ignaz von Döllinger, and it was the Establishment of the Church of England which curtailed the religious liberties and intellectual freedoms of many Englishmen like Acton. I can only say that I have made no secret of my thorough-going disestablishmentarianism and my belief that Anglicanism does not need to rely on Establishment to be a coherent theological and ecclesiological system.

For his part, Acton privately resented but publicly ignored the Anglican Establishment although he found Establishment doctrinally unpalatable because the notion of a national church was an effective denial of the Christian universality asserted by the Roman curia.¹ His foremost intellectual challenges were not, in any event, with the Church of England but with his own Church. Its internal debates, especially those touching on the origins and exercise of authority, were for Acton a continuing preoccupation.

Acton, who planned but never published a major work on the history of liberty, was identified with the nineteenth century ‘Liberal Catholic’ group which was highly critical of authoritarian ultramontanist influences within the Church and scornful of many aspects of the Church’s history, including the use of intimidation, torture and assassination to achieve doctrinal compliance and ecclesiastical submission. It is for a forthright reflection on the promulgation of the dogma of papal infallibility by Pope Pius IX in 1870 that Acton is widely remembered. In a letter written to Professor Mandell Creighton (Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Cambridge and later Bishop of Peterborough and then London) who had asked Acton to review one part of his multi-volume *History of the Papacy* for the *English Historical Review*, Acton remarked that ‘Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely’. *Lord Acton’s Dictum*, as it has become known, was an indictment of papal power offered by a loyal but not unquestioning Catholic who also notably pronounced, in the same context, that ‘great men are almost always bad men’.

Some Catholics did secede from the Roman Catholic Church in despair after the Vatican Council of 1869-70. Acton was not among them.² He was, however, in an awkward position. One of his earliest biographers, Gertrude Himmelfarb, remarked that he was ‘too Liberal for the Catholics and too Catholic for the Liberals’. This did not, however, prevent Acton from contributing to public debates in the pages of journals and magazines, especially over matters relating to conscience.

Acton had become 'co-proprietor' and editor of the liberal-leaning Catholic journal, *The Rambler*, after John Henry (later Cardinal) Newman relinquished the post in 1859. Three years later he merged this journal with the *Home and Foreign Review*. Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman, who had been in charge of the young Acton's school at Oscott in Birmingham, publicly censured the *Review* later the same year for the controversial views it contained ahead of the Pope's declaration in 1864 that the opinions of Catholic writers were subject to the authority of the Roman congregations. To preserve his intellectual integrity and literary freedom, Acton closed down the *Home and Foreign Review* but continued to contribute articles to the *North British Review*, previously a Scottish Free Church publication.

Acton is still celebrated as a historian (although he wrote and published comparatively little history) but his continuing importance as a creative political theorist should not be overlooked. Despite the personal disabilities he endured as a Catholic and the oppressive character of the Anglican Establishment, he was against 'programmes of reaction' and preferred gradual institutional evolution. He trusted 'changes arising from special historical situations rather than from the minds of presumptuous men [such as Comte and Rousseau]'. He also thought that those who subscribed to 'materialist, relativist secularism' propagated a sterile belief. His view of the State was an expansive one. It was much more than a conglomeration of individuals assembled together to maximise their common interests.

Acton was, however, troubled by the conduct of thoroughly religious societies that were too rigid in the promotion of specific doctrines and was distressed when they lacked respect for genuine diversity of opinion and reasonable dissent. In this lecture, taking a few cues from Lord Acton's writings about political discourse and civil order, my concerns are with an inverse set of circumstances. I am troubled that the secularising of Australian society has included anti-religious attitudes and been hastened by anti-religious actions, and I am concerned that the confusion of secularism with atheism has the potential to provoke extremism that could disrupt the present peaceful coexistence of those with religious beliefs and those with none.

Introduction

In this address I want to propose and then defend four related contentions. My *first* contention is that there are many contested meanings of the word secular and that a lack of clarity about the aims and remit of secularism has given rise to political suspicion and ideological warfare. *Secondly*, as Australia has steadily become a less religious nation with a progressively more pluralist culture, tolerance of religion and respect for diversity has diminished in some quarters. *Thirdly*, a chasm has opened between the public objectives of those pursuing some forms of secularism and the religious aspirations of some faith communities. My *fourth* contention has to do with the consequences of the foregoing three: there comes a point when secularism radicalises religious people and, when certain social conditions combine with particular theological precepts, radicalism turns into extremism. I will base my remarks predominantly on the Christian religion and the mainline Churches because i) Christianity is (and is likely to remain) the most popular religion in Australia and ii) the Churches are the religious communities that I know most about.

In the time available I am unable to consider several related and complicated questions but I want to acknowledge their existence and the need for them to be

addressed. Are atheism, agnosticism, rationalism and humanism the only options in a secular society? How does a secular society deal with the more extreme religious aspirations of its citizens without either commending or condemning the theological beliefs on which they are founded? What response does a secular society make to so-called 'prophetic utterances' originating within a religious community that foretell a nation's demise or encourage a community's destruction? How can a secular society defend the limits it places on the expression of religious beliefs or the restrictions it places on the practice of religious customs when it does not claim for itself competence to critique any religious tradition or the theological consistency of the behaviour it inspires?

I hope to deal with some of these matters in my book *Losing my Religion: Unbelief in Australia* which the University of New South Wales Press plans to release in November 2009 to coincide with the sesquicentennial of the first publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*.

What is Secularism?

Before offering a few definitions that might prove helpful, you need to be aware that the terms 'secular', 'secularisation' and 'secularism' are now thoroughly contested by scholars in their academic work and are commonly confused by ordinary people in everyday conversation. There is, in fact, a substantial and growing body of literature dedicated solely to the explication of terms and the connection of theoretical constructs with social realities. This is part of the problem I am seeking to outline. In the time available to me, I can only offer a broad working definition and convey a general sense of how I intend to use these words.

The word *secular* is a modern term used to distinguish a realm of human experience that is distinct and separate from the 'religious'. *Secularisation* is an analytical concept referring to a cluster of processes accounting for the transformation of institutions and ideas in the religious domain and their transfer to the secular realm. The original goal of secularisation was the transformation of ecclesiastical vocations, such as elementary education and physical healing, so that they no longer presumed a religious calling, and the transfer of ecclesiastical properties, such as schools and hospitals, to independent non-ecclesiastical authorities. *Secularism* is a worldview committed to the maintenance of legal-constitutional distinctions between church and state and the elimination of political support for, and legal endorsement of, religious causes and denominational campaigns.

Most commentators agree that pre-Enlightenment European societies were thoroughly animated by religious values and informed by religious virtues. These societies entered a period of transformation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when their political organisation and public life either no longer required or no longer presumed firm commitment to religious beliefs and customs. John Locke's depiction of a civil society's origins and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's theory of the 'social contract' had the effect of taking religion out of popular discourse concerning the essence of individual fulfilment and collective discernment of the common good. Indeed, Rousseau used the term 'civil religion' for what he regarded as the necessary moral and social foundations that were needed to sustain an effective political order. This civil religion was not and could not be founded on religious dogma, according to Rousseau, but on what he referred to as 'the sanctity of the social contract'.³

There were, not surprisingly, those who protested the effective marginalisation and essential subordination of religion but there was a widespread embrace of this new view of the political order undergirded by the emerging authority and power of the secular nation-state. The slow demise of the Church's institutional dominance and the weakening of clerical control on popular culture were accompanied by new ideological outlooks and liberated intellectual inquiries. But the old world did not completely disintegrate; the new one was not fully established. In fact, they co-existed and still do. Those who continued to cling to a more religious vision of human life were not convinced that political institutions and a public space that was completely devoid of religious insights was a good thing. They recognised that many religious beliefs and practices had been compromised in and through the Church's marriage with the state but sincerely believed some interaction between church and state was necessary for the health of the body politic. Those who resented the continuing influence of religious perspectives on personal morality and public life wanted to drive religion from the public square altogether so as to secure what they imagined was a genuinely secular state and society. This entailed calls for the prohibition of all public expressions of religious belief and sentiment.

In contemporary Australia there are opposing camps inhabited by people wanting to pursue a particular kind of secularism — widely promoted and often perceived as the political arm of atheism — and those determined to resist its spread. Elsewhere in the world, such as in France, the advocates of atheistic secularism have turned to administrative law; whereas in places like Afghanistan, its opponents have resorted to brute force. What, then, can be said of the Australian experience of secularism, both past and present?

Is Australia secular?

Notwithstanding widespread misunderstanding, Australia is not a Christian country — legally, or in any other sense, and it never has been. There is no denying that the Christian faith has influenced public life and popular culture but Christianity has never been legally established as the national religion nor does the Constitution privilege the Anglican Church or any other religious organisation.⁴ Section 116 of the Constitution precludes the Commonwealth from impeding the expression of religion (any religion) or from establishing any religious entity or imposing any religious test for the holding of public office. Those who drafted the Australian constitution realised that the citizens of the Commonwealth would have religious affiliations and aspirations, and they accepted the present and continuing reality of religious disagreement and diversity. Such an attitude is what you would expect of an open, free and tolerant society. But, and again despite widespread misunderstanding, the Australian Constitution did not create a secular state or effectively privilege secularism either. I need to acknowledge that this is a contested point of view.

In an article entitled 'Australia's foundations were definitely and deliberately not Christian' published by the *Sydney Morning Herald* in June 2004, Dr Helen Irving of the University of Sydney's Law Faculty took issue with claims, inferences and assumptions made by a number of national leaders, including Governor-General Michael Jeffrey, former Prime Minister John Howard and former federal Treasurer Peter Costello, that Australia is in some sense a 'Christian nation' or that it possesses a 'Christian heritage' from which it continues to draw substantial tangible benefits. Such claims, she says,

'are not only offensive to many decent and honourable Australians who are either non-religious or follow another faith'. These views, she alleges, 'distort our history and disturb our carefully wrought constitutional settlement.' Irving goes on to assert that 'Australia has a secular heritage' which was 'reflected nationally in the Commonwealth Constitution.'

Irving infers that the term 'secular' means 'non-religious' or 'a-religious' although it actually meant 'without denominational affiliation or formal association' when the Constitution was being drafted in the 1890s. She says that 'State schools were required to be secular.' Such a stipulation did not mean, however, that they were non-religious but that the religion taught in these schools was not intended to be denominationally driven or biased. The concern was to avoid damaging and divisive sectarianism. Irving claims that section 116 was a departure 'from English practice, it went even further than the First Amendment in the United States Constitution, which only forbids law establishing a religion or prohibiting free religious practice.' Her claim is incorrect in fact and mistaken in interpretation. The First Amendment forbids law 'establishing religion' whereas the wording of the Australian constitution is 'establishing *any* religion'. Although the difference is only one word, the High Court has concluded that it was the Americans who actually went much further by identifying religion per se whereas the Australians were only concerned with one denomination gaining legal primacy or political ascendancy.

There are, however, a growing number of activists and groups who are working towards a strict and, in my view, unachievable separation of Church and State, citing the Constitution as its reputed legal basis. One such group, the Secular Party of Australia, has embraced a particular kind of secularism that I find troubling.

The Secular Party of Australia unsuccessfully campaigned for parliamentary representation in the recent Federal election. Under the slogan 'Freedom from Religion', the Secular Party's aims included bringing 'about a true separation of church and state', the promotion of 'secularism worldwide', the 'fullest use of science for human welfare', and the espousal of 'policies which support a rational approach to human problems'. It is against 'unwanted impositions of religious dogma, government support for religious schools, religious attire at schools, religious indoctrination of children and all forms of religious coercion and theocracy'. It argued that 'a truly secular country is one in which society is fully organised on the basis of reason' which required the state's indifference to 'beliefs based merely on tradition, superstition and notions of the supernatural'. While upholding the entitlement of individuals to 'hold any form of belief, however implausible' the Secular Party thinks 'these should be held privately and should not receive government endorsement or support'.

It asserted that 'religious beliefs have no basis in reason or in factual evidence' and on the basis of the obvious differences between religions concludes 'that it cannot reasonably be accepted that any religion is true'. Furthermore, 'religious beliefs impose and give rise to an increasing intrusion on civil liberties and provide an unwelcome source of social disharmony'. In wanting to 'uphold the internationally recognised Rights of the Child', the Secular Party wanted to protect 'children from religious indoctrination. This involves instructing them with moral values based on universal principles, free from the corrupting influence of religion'. The party was not opposed to private schools but they would need to 'disassociate themselves from their religious

affiliations' and exclude anything in the curriculum which 'suggested there is such a thing as the one true religion'.

Notably, the Secular Party does not believe that religion is ever benign. It holds that 'religions are not only untrue but harmful to society', and that 'secular moral values based on universal ethical principles' are superior. Thus, it is not sufficient to 'seek to mitigate the symptoms' of the 'delusory nature of religion'. This is because, the Party's president, Dr John Perkins, says: 'this approach is not working'. He notes a resolution passed in support of 'comprehensive secularism' by the 2005 conference of the International Humanist and Ethical Union' which included a 'preparedness to intervene to protect human rights from violation by religious assertions and injunctions'. This entailed the 'explicit recognition that myths are myths'. He expected that people would 'react defensively when confronted with their delusions' but thought this would be ameliorated by the concession that 'all myths should be treated with equal incredulity'. The Secular Party nonetheless claims that it is 'non-religious rather than anti-religious'.

The clear and unambiguous message proclaimed by this and similar groups is that anyone possessing religious beliefs is plainly duped and probably bent on damaging society by the propagation of such beliefs. This entitles the secularist to stand in judgement on all religions and to condemn their adherents. While these extreme ideas and radical projects are presently promoted at the fringes of popular political discourse, I detect their slow and steady movement into the mainstream. I am not able in this lecture to present a case for the reasonableness of theistic belief or to mount a defence of organised religion. But I would argue that the Secular Party's mindset reflects not a triumph of human rationality but a failure of human imagination. Its manifesto represents a veiled form of political tyranny and ideological oppression. It is yet another closed belief system with little capacity for self-criticism sustained by an absolute conviction regarding the necessity of its own ascendancy.

At the heart of these tensions lies yet another dispute about Australian history. To what extent was Australian society really founded on Christian principles? How important have these principles been to the continuing health and sustained prosperity of the Commonwealth? What does it mean to say that Australia has a 'Christian heritage' and of what does it consist? Must this heritage be preserved, quite apart from its continuation in the common life of the churches, when the beliefs on which it was founded are no longer held by the majority of citizens? There is no shortage of perspectives and opinions on these matters. The principal challenge is to establish the extent of Australia's religiosity and its bearing on public life. So what do we make of the claim that Australia is a godless nation?

A Godless Society?

Last year's Acton Lecturer, the distinguished journalist Paul Kelly, noted 'a growing revolt against the secularisation of public life ... the Australian trend is a symptom of the international disillusionment outside Europe with secularisation. Australia is a classic study in frustration over the limitations of the liberal democratic state'. Kelly observes widespread 'recognition that the idea of the state as value-neutral was a phoney proposition' and claims that 'secularists who want religion removed from politics are fighting a losing cause' because 'religion will return in Australia within the over-arching framework of the values debate'.

The assertion that God is making a comeback and that religion has returned to public life, specifically politics, also features in three books released over the past few years although the authors are less empathetic in their attitude to this apparent development than is Paul Kelly. Marion Maddox in *God Under Howard*, Amanda Lohrey in *Voting for Jesus* and Margaret Simons in *Faith, Money, Power* are adamant that Australia is presently undergoing some form of religious revival. Let me explore Margaret Simon's book, the most recent of the three, to see what evidence is cited and the significance this trend is accorded.

To my surprise, Simon's research is limited to her own targeted attendance at worship services, some personal interviews with people who attend Sydney's Hillsong Church and newspaper reports of several public scandals mainly to do with church use of public money. There is no hard data. No statistics; no survey results; no sociological studies. We are offered little more than anecdotes and impressions. Simons nevertheless refers to the 'new-wave of faith based politics' which is drawing on 'Pentecostalism and evangelicalism' although she defines neither theological tradition nor does she say much about their position within Australian Christianity. She confesses to being 'worried about where we are being taken in the wave of faith, this resurgence of heart and spirit over head, this re-entry of religion into public life and particularly into politics'. Later, she says 'the idea of political influence in the new Pentecostalism' scares 'so many of us'. Why? Because 'from the outside these religious groups look like cults. Even more worrying, they seem to disregard or distrust science. They represent the triumph of emotion over reason'.

Quite apart from a rather breezy treatment of complex social and religious phenomena and the absence of definitional rigour in her book (there is, for instance, a substantial body of literature distinguishing sects from cults and mystic groups of which she is plainly unaware), is there any evidence to support claims of a *revival* of religion in popular culture and the *re-entry* of religion into public life?

Although the Reverend James Denney described Australia as 'the most godless place under heaven' in 1824, most commentators agree that Australia was a reasonably religious society until the mid-1950s when both affiliation and participation began to decline. The only consistent measure we have of the nation's religiosity is census data collected since 1901. Each national census has included a question about religion. It is simply worded and has not changed: 'What is your religion?' Although the intention is to ascertain information about affiliation, the answer hints at the nature of a person's beliefs. For the first twenty years after Federation, the percentage of the population identifying as Christian (the combined total of all denominations) hovered around 95 per cent. After its voluntary nature was specifically stated for the first time in 1933, the percentage dropped to 86 per cent. It remained at this level until the mid-1960s. The 1971 census featured the introduction of the instruction 'if no religion, write none'. This produced a sevenfold increase in the proportion of the population stating 'no religion' from the previous census year.

The number of people responding in this way has risen steadily over the ensuing two decades with the curious exception of 2001 when the 'no religion' group declined both in total numbers and as a percentage of the population, down by 43,000 to represent 15.5 per cent of the population. At the same time, the number of people declaring themselves to be atheists increased from 7,500 in 1996 to 24,500 in 2001.

The number of agnostics also increased, from 8,800 in 1996 to 17,500 in 2001, with a smaller number (5,041) claiming to be 'humanists' and an even smaller number (1,617) identifying as 'rationalists'. [The 'no religion' sub-categories are agnosticism, atheism, humanism and rationalism].

In 2006, the trend evident in previous decades resumed probably because those who had declared their religion as 'Jedi' in 2001 returned to their former fold. Those stating 'no religion' made up 18.7 per cent of the population (an increase of 27.5 per cent on the previous census year). Those who declined to answer the question made up 11.2 per cent of the population (an increase of 21.2 per cent on 2001). The combined total of those with said 'no religion' and those who declined to answer is 5.92 million. By way of contrast, in New Zealand the 2006 census figure for 'no religion' was 34.7 per cent, up from 29.6 in 2001. It appeared to some that Australia was not, in fact, the most godless place under heaven after all!

There is, then, nothing concrete to suggest that belief in God is increasing or that Australia is undergoing a religious revival. There has been the emergence of so-called mega-churches, like Hillsong, but their growth has largely been at the expense of parish churches or other religious groups. They have attracted and retained very few converts. But the growth of these churches cannot be used to substantiate the claim that religion has 're-entered' politics or that the churches have become politically influential, especially given the philosophical antipathy between Family First and Hillsong and the lack of institutional support among mainline denominations, like the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches, for the Australian Christian Lobby. The Churches never went away; they have always wanted to influence policy and to shape the course of everyday life. Whereas they previously relied upon their adherents being elected to parliament and speaking from their religious convictions and safeguarding the church's interests, over the past decade some Christians (mainly social conservatives) have become better organised politically and more committed to political advocacy. I would contend that Christians are presently being heard to an extent fairly reflecting their size and pervasiveness as a social constituency.

I suspect that most Australians believe that this country's culture is already thoroughly secularised and is likely to remain so. After all, Christianity's holy days have become secular holidays while Sundays are little different from the rest of the working week. I would be surprised if anyone could reasonably claim that Australia hosts anything other than a non-religious popular culture while no-one could realistically claim that any church effectively 'runs Australia'. Conversely, Church leaders complain about being ignored and believe themselves to be impotent – sometimes even within their own faith communities as well. But tensions have increased as a consequence of the wilful association of secularism with atheism and what the public promotion of godlessness in some quarters means to those with religious beliefs.

A Widening Philosophical Gulf?

There is no doubt that those who want religion banished from the public square on the grounds that theistic beliefs are intellectually vacuous, morally bankrupt, politically dangerous and socially divisive are increasing in number and in voice throughout the world. They have been encouraged by writers like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Michel Onfray, Sam Harris and Anthony Grayling, whose active promotion of atheism has included vigorous denunciation of all religion. They do not

support religious toleration because they believe these convictions are the cause of much serious and enduring harm in the world, not unlike racism and sexism, both of which have been the focus of legislative prohibitions in many jurisdictions. Radical atheistic secularists like Dawkins and strident Church-State separationists like Sam Harris have a range of motivations for wanting an end to the public expression of religious beliefs and the conduct of religious ceremonies. Some simply dislike religion and despise those who peddle it. Others resent the historic privileges enjoyed by Christianity and the churches as purveyors of the majority religion in most Western countries.

While I am personally against official religions and Established churches, states claiming to be neutral in matters relating to religion and those describing themselves as non-religious can (and have) been readily transformed into regimes perceived to be anti-religious. Modern France is a good example. The controversial decision of the French National Assembly in February 2004 to adopt a law banning “symbols and clothing that ostentatiously show students’ religious membership” in public elementary, middle and high schools is an example of aggressive and, one could argue, highly selective secularism. The wearing of the Muslim headscarf by women – the main target of the legislation – was as much a cultural symbol as a religious one and might, in a spirit of fraternity and toleration, have been overlooked. And the law was selective in that the French government pays the salaries of Christian clergy who serve as chaplains in France’s armed forces. The policy was widely interpreted as imposing a new limit on religious freedom in France and implying an official lack of respect for the beliefs of one religious community. It revealed a less than laudable element of promoting strict separation. The French ombudsman, Bernard Stasi, tried to explain to community groups and media outlets that secularism ‘is the separation of church and state, but it is also the respect of differences’. As the New Zealand sociologist of religion, Rex Ahdar, observes:

If the State teaches that all religious references are to be extirpated from public life and that society can be ordered as if God does not exist, it is hardly surprising that some believers interpret this as a marginalization and even rejection of their faith. All too quickly a State which begins as “neutral” ends up promoting an irreligious worldview.

Dr Samuel Gregg, a former fellow of the Centre for Independent Studies, claimed several years ago that Australia is beset by what he called ‘doctrinaire secularism’. He based his claim on the observation that ‘even mentioning God in the public square is questionable. It further maintains that any religiously-motivated action is unacceptable in the public square.’ Although these debates are much more intense in the United States where passions clearly run deeper, Gregg claimed that ‘doctrinaire secularism’ is nevertheless a threat to both democracy and pluralism in Australia.

Taken to its logical conclusion, doctrinaire secularism amounts to the promotion of a type of atheism as the unofficial state religion. By this, I mean that the secularist state insists that anyone contributing to political discussion or acting in the capacity of a state official ought to act as if there is no God, or if there is, this ought to have no bearing whatsoever upon their choices and actions. These are not religiously neutral positions.

I would concede that this kind of secularism is, in part, a response to the persistence of Christian cultural hegemony and presumptions of superiority among and within the Churches. There is an element of pay-back in some forms of secularism that is not hard to understand. In previous centuries those without religious beliefs were not only socially shunned but were also politically despised. Their loyalty to the state was called into question; their moral integrity was the subject of doubt. But there is, in my view, nothing to commend the movement from victim to perpetrator. Is there a way forward that does not lead to recriminations or reprisals on either side of the religious divide?

A way forward?

In his new book *A Secular Age*, the eminent Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor explains that modern 'secularisation' involves a 'very confused set of assumptions and master narratives'. Taylor rejects the traditional secularisation thesis – that changes associated with modernity including economic growth, urbanisation, greater geographical and social mobility, and the rise of technology and science effectively undermined and marginalised religion and brought on secularisation. He believes this thesis relied on a simple global notion of religion that was manifestly inadequate and a succinct definition of secularism that was concerned only with the absence of religion. He says a 'more believable form of narrative' is that developments in modernity did destabilise earlier forms of religious life but thinks their decline was followed by a 'recomposition' of new forms. There are, Taylor observes, 'new kinds of devotion, discipline, congregational life; but also new ways in which (in some sense) 'religious' markers become central to political mobilisation, often in competition to more 'secular' markers ... and also the ways in which 'religion' is seen as essential to the stability of social-moral order'.

Taylor contends that secularism in some parts of the Western world has tried to 'marginalise the churches and modes of faith which sustained them' with the resultant pluralism taking the form of 'some form of public *secularity*, some *neutrality* of the state in the face of different spiritual options, or *principled distance* of the state' from new religious forms. The tensions are made worse, Taylor notes,

by an ideology of 'secularisation' which feeds off the older narrative, which starts from the illusion that religion can just be sidelined, eg., that political debates in a plural society should be carried out in terms of reason alone (Kant's *blosse Vernunft*), with the injection of religious premises or arguments; or that we can separate people's purely secular interests from their religious ones. An outlook of this kind sees any difference about the place of religion as the result of an unjust eruption of religion into the public sphere, an attempt to set the clock back. This outlook also nourishes the illusion that there is a simple solution to the problem of religion in society – you just 'separate church and state' or just adopt *laïcité*, which can be applied anywhere.

Taylor says 'a race of humans has arisen which has managed to experience its world entirely as immanent'. Exclusive humanists have 'closed the transcendent window'. This is, he believes, 'a victory for darkness, but it is a remarkable victory nonetheless'. For Taylor, modern secularism is the expression of a holistic human experience that sees the world and approaches life in such a self-contained way that religion can only

be viewed as unhealthy, delusionary and bizarre. The secularist cannot imagine the world from the perspective of the religious believer.

In its confrontation with forms of militant Islam, the West may be giving the impression (and probably is) that the current struggle is between Muslim theocracy and secular (meaning godless) democracy. Western strategic aims are thought to include the imposition of secular modernity and this means the relegation of religion to the margins of society. Taylor proposes what he calls 'Secularity 3'. This is in contrast to earlier forms. 'Secularity 1' has the state positioned 'above religion'. 'Secularity 2' is willing the decline of religious belief. 'Secularity 3' is focussed only on the making of the secular subject as one who can have religious faith without expecting others to share it'. Taylor's purpose is to show that it is possible to be a believer who is also a secularist; to explain how religious belief can be protected and even defended by secularism; and, to outline the costs and burdens born by a fully secular state and society. My present work on religion and society reflects similar intent.

Radicalism, Extremism and Fanaticism

The spread of secularism and the mere existence of a secular state worries and frustrates some Christian people. They believe that Australia was and is a Christian nation notwithstanding the provisions and prohibitions contained in the Constitution. They hold to this belief because more than half the population self-identify as Christians and because they contend that Australia has been a place of prosperity and peace by virtue of its Christian heritage. They believe that all political power derives from God and that the state must always and everywhere act in a manner consonant with what they perceive to be the divine purpose.

For much of this nation's history it has been possible to combine the demands of Christianity with the expectations of citizenship because Christianity provided the basis for popular culture and it gave both shape and substance to expressions of citizenship. There are now many conflicts between Christian convictions and various aspects of public life, and not only in the area of personal morality and social policy. The fundamental discontinuity between the secular worldview and religious outlooks has prompted three broad responses within faith communities. The first and traditional response is to seek a broader accommodation of religious ideals while working to promote the universality of one's religion for human flourishing. I do not intend to say more about this response.

The second holds that if the state will not acknowledge the sovereignty of God, religious believers are justified in rejecting the body politic and at critical points of dispute defying the state. Members of such groups become a community within a community. They choose to be distinct and different and to live according to their own lights minimising their contact with the world's corruption. We usually have nothing to fear from such groups. They keep to themselves and do not obstruct the lives of those who do not share their beliefs. There is evidence that this tendency continues, even in modern Australia. Sometimes it is a simple sea-change, a desire to live more simply in solitude and silence. At other times it is a genuine hatred for the excesses of modern life and a refusal by members to be tainted by popular culture. Such groups are often sects; they need not be cults. They want to be left alone and, for the greatest part, are content to leave other people to live free and unfettered lives.

The third approach is direct confrontation with the institutions and machinery of the state so as to reverse secularising trends because, it is alleged, these trends promote godlessness. I detect a growing tendency in all religious communities to confront and challenge what is deemed a godless rather than pluralist society. This becomes a cause of concern when the response is extreme. This is more likely to happen when religious communities believe the state requires some action or attitude that is contrary to the community's sacred texts and which involve an effective denial of core convictions, and when the host society leaves no room for religious convictions to shape personal belonging or behaving. One of the possible outcomes is the creation of religious ghettos manifest in separatist schools, sporting competitions and cultural activities. From such ghettos, demands for exemptions from a range of civic duties and obligations, such as voting, jury service and taxation liabilities, are likely to come. I do not believe such a situation serves this nation's best interests because it entrenches a mood of hostility that can turn very ugly.

A personal perspective

What, then, does secularism mean to me as a religious believer and why might it be embraced by other religious people? I believe that the principal objective of contemporary secularism must be the creation and maintenance of an open and inclusive society that recognises the importance of religious views to those who hold them and which respects the integrity and sincerity of religious communities in their quest for truth and purpose. A genuine, mature secularism will be confident of its character, convinced of its core values and competent in their promotion. Such an approach to civic life does not oblige anyone to drive religious views out of public sight in the hope of pushing them out of private minds.

The genuinely secular state does not presume itself competent to make judgements about the truth or otherwise of religious beliefs and claims. It does not claim the entitlement to prohibit the expression of any religious view nor will it seek to discourage anyone from associating with any religious community unless it is intent on harming the body politic. The secular state will respect the rights of citizens to hold and profess a range of views in their own homes or in private gatherings. Religiously-inclined citizens must be able to discuss and even propagate their views in public unless or until they attempt to impose them on others by coercion or try to further their aims by illegal means. A secular state is not, then, entitled to exclude the religious views of citizens from influencing the shape of the public space nor should it ignore or dismiss these views when formulating policy that will affect every citizen. The secular state must not, of course, discriminate between those with religious views and those with none. The state is, however, permitted to contribute to programs offered by religious organisations that coincide with the interests of the host society on the basis that these programs are open to every citizen and that the principal beneficiary is the civil society rather than the religious organisation.

Secularism does not occupy a sanctified place or a privileged status from which bias, prejudice or ignorance is banished simply because some of its proponents dismiss belief in God. Nor can the state presume it possesses all wisdom, insight and understanding on the basis that it has rejected any obligation to embody divine laws. Secularism is tradition-dependent. It does not exist in a vacuum: it is a product of fallible reason and faltering experience. It has philosophical origins and a historical pedigree. It embodies certain beliefs that require the exercise of faith. It is, in my view,

a form of human idolatry to believe in the utter self-sufficiency of human beings and the perfectibility of human reason. Both are the enemies of freedom. This was the view of Friedrich Hayek in *The Constitution of Liberty* published in 1960. Hayek wrote:

The case for individual freedom rests chiefly on the recognition of the inevitable ignorance of all of us concerning a great many of the factors on which the achievement of our ends and welfare depends... Liberty is essential in order to leave room for the unforeseeable and unpredictable.

Although I remain completely committed to my religion and try to live according to its principles, I am a staunch defender of the religious plurality that has been an historic feature of Australian public life. But there is an enormous difference between devotion and extremism. In wanting to promote my religion and to propagate its convictions, I believe that persuasion is the only means mandated by the religious texts from which these convictions are drawn. For Christians, coercion is prohibited because it violates the freedom that is necessary for the exercise of faith. Some need to be reminded that sixteenth century advocates of the liberty of conscience looked forward to the day when this fundamental tenet would be adopted more broadly.

My first and best energies need, then, to be devoted to a cogent intellectual defence of my religious beliefs and an apologia for the public proclamation of my religious aspirations together with an explanation of the customs of the religious community to which I belong. I am entitled to challenge, both publicly and privately, any and every claim (religious or otherwise) that seeks to disprove or disqualify my religious beliefs and practices. The expression of this entitlement naturally becomes more vigorous if and when I feel that my beliefs and practices are not shown any respect or are subjected to ridicule. Similarly, I am obliged as a religious believer to recognise and respect the opinions of those whose intellect and conscience leads them to the conclusion that there is no god and that theistic religion is unsustainable.

It is to be regretted that people of Christian faith have treated those who do not share that faith or who cannot bring themselves to embrace that faith so shamefully in the nation's past. They achieved nothing productive by such behaviour which is contrary to the principles of the religion they were claiming to represent and, presumably, sought to defend.

I am convinced that a genuinely secular society will not provoke religious extremism. And while nothing justifies religiously-inspired political violence, a genuine secular society will avoid creating the conditions that can be exploited by those who misread the sacred texts of their religion and confuse persuasion with coercion and faith with fear in their attempts to create a society the rest of us I hope will be determined to resist.

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¹ I have been greatly assisted in my understanding of Acton's thought by Canon John Nurser's excellent study, *The Reign of Conscience: Individual, Church, and State in Lord Acton's History of Liberty*, Garland Press, London, 1987.

² Acton's journal remains an important commentary on the working and progress of the Council. It was edited and published by the Catholic Theological Faculty in Sydney in 1975 with an Introduction penned by Fr Edmund Campion that I found helpful.

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'On Civil Religion', chapter 8, Book IV of *On the Social Contract*, in Donald A. Cress (ed.), *Basic Political Writings*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1987, p. 226.

⁴ There is some debate about whether the Church of England was Established in the colony of New South Wales before Governor Bourke's *Church Act* was enacted in 1836.