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The Critical Importance of Keeping Religion out of Government

By Luca Farrow

SYNOPSIS

There is a clear and compelling rationale for secular governance, but it may be taken for granted, if it is not asserted and reasserted. Religion has been featuring ever more prominently in government in many places across the globe, including the United States, and secular states must brace for challenges to their fundamental nature.

COMMENTARY

The word “secular”, derived from the Latin *saeculum*, may be defined as describing things that are “of this world”. It does not have to be defined against religion but helpfully distinguishes the material from the “spiritual”. The way the secular is portrayed is distinct in different places. We hear of the French model, the British model, the American model, or the Singaporean model. The understanding and priority given to both freedom *from* religion and freedom *of* religion vary across different secular countries.

The various ways secularism is understood and put into practice are why the term and the idea have been open to intense scrutiny in academic fields, such as political science and sociology, and among learned advocates for a greater role of religion in public life. But just like ideas such as “religion”, while complex and ever-evolving, we do, to a large extent, “know it when we see it”. For example, the value of the idea of the secular as a way of ensuring that government and public money are devoted to the needs of people in the most mundane and objective sense is clear.

Arbitrary Decision-Making Based on Religion

Religious motivations, often based on truth claims in scriptures, which inform some important decision-making for religious people, may be experienced as arbitrary by

the non-religious (or non-aligned) and, indeed, by adherents of many other religions. While there may be scientific claims to the contrary, the authority of scripture or other teachings held sacred ultimately rests on faith, and it should not be imposed on everybody else.

While faith – broadly understood – may be a universal phenomenon insofar as we all sometimes have faith in things and people despite the absence of evidence, this is distinct from faith in a belief system, often with its metaphysical framework and an often extensive list of recommendations, prescriptions, and restrictions.

Warnings against the arbitrariness of religious motivations may also be met with the criticism that a secular framework for decision-making may itself rely on irrational emotions and biases and is never completely “scientific”. This is true, but there are ways to mitigate against distortions in thought, and this reality of all human thinking is no reason to lean into a faith-based worldview with its own inbuilt biases and inconsistencies.

It may also be argued that the priority given to “rational” decision-making is an outdated Enlightenment perspective, possibly Western and privileged, divorced from the lived experiences of people in different parts of the world. Indeed, where traditional religious systems of life enhance people’s lives, this should be recognised and respected. However, we need to be mindful of the possible downsides of making policy based on belief systems and also consider who is left at the [margins](#) when we do so.

Moral Underpinning

We often hear that religious ideas and religious leaders can offer a moral compass to guide policy in what is presented as an otherwise Godless, therefore amoral, if not immoral, context. Undeniably, religious teachings can imbue people with perspectives and concerns that help mitigate against the worst aspects of the societies they live in. Whether this be the politician who feels compelled to deliver some social security net out of a religious priority to look after the needy, or the business owner who feels his faith compels him to pay his employees better. Religiously motivated decision-making can result in socially desirable outcomes.

However, the assumptions in the previous paragraph can be usefully unpacked. Non-religious people can be moral people with altruistic intentions towards other human beings, and non-religion and nihilism cannot be considered the same thing. Non-religious lives can be rich with meaning, and, indeed, meaning can be derived from altruistic acts. One might expect the absence of a religious guiding framework, with preferences given to certain religious in-groups, to enable a more even-handed assessment of needs across a population.

There are numerous examples of both atheistic and theocratic governments prosecuting wars and persecuting people. Both religious and atheist decision-makers are capable of causing harm and of doing good. However, when policy is motivated, explicitly or tacitly, as being in the interests of God or a particular religious community, that policy becomes inscrutable and unsuited to democracy.

Pressing Need to Prioritise Secularism

Why revisit these well-rehearsed debates now? The reality is that religious nationalism has been on the rise around the world, and the trend appears to be accelerating. In secular states, while religious language, such as “God Bless America”, is not new, the elevation of religious perspectives seems unprecedented.

Sometimes, these perspectives are voiced out of a sincere piety; other times, they are opportunistic ploys to appeal to a perceived sympathetic voting bloc. In Europe, far-right anti-immigrant parties have long appealed to a problematic “[Judeo-Christian](#)” heritage, which rhetoric has also been adopted by political parties of governments. In [Hungary](#), Viktor Orban has used appeals to Christianity to marginalise minorities. In [India](#), Hindu nationalism has significantly altered the terms of political debate. In the [United States](#), Donald Trump’s cabinet features Christian nationalists prominently.

Secularism may be a starting point for policy debate, but it provides the strongest and fairest basis. While religious communities in majority contexts may be tempted to argue that aspects of their own religious worldview should inform the societal norm, their co-religionists in minority contexts value secularism highly. For example, in [Australia](#), evidence suggests the majority of Muslims prefer secularism, even if some of those may think Shariah law could be appropriate in Muslim-majority countries. Secularism is the best approach to avoid majoritarianism and diminishing alternative perspectives.

Some argue that public policy deliberation should increasingly accommodate religious perspectives. This may be argued to be a possible antidote to “worldly” failings such as nepotism, corruption, or corporate excess. But this brings us back to the impossibility of weighing the sacred with the profane.

Jürgen Habermas, a German philosopher and social theorist, has spoken of the post-secular and the need for secular systems to accommodate religious perspectives if they are translated into the language of the secular. This is problematic because it could lead to opacity in decision-making. Furthermore, it would be naive to assume that all religious voices would be equally voiced and heard in a scenario of greater openness to religious viewpoints. In actuality, religious groups with the most resources and best access to decision-makers, or who are most adept at translating their views into secular terms, would have the most significant impact on policy.

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