

# Religion and the secular state revisited

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## State, religion and difference

If the relationship between the state and religion is not the burning (in two senses) issue that it was in centuries past, yet it has received a small but steady glow of attention in political philosophy over the last decade (eg Audi 1989 & 1991; Weithman 1991; Macedo 1995; Rawls 1995, especially the Introduction; Connolly 1995, especially chapters 4 & 6). In large part, this interest has been stimulated by debates over the extent to which societies that claim liberal political foundations can accommodate cultural difference. Such debates reflect a growing unease about whether liberalism's hands-off policy of 'benign neglect' really guarantees freedom for vulnerable minorities, or whether it merely abandons them to the attrition of indifference or even, from time to time, hostility. Liberalism's defenders (such as John Rawls) and critics (such as William Connolly) have tried to find ways in which societies which profess no theological foundation can make room for religious diversity without at the same time buying into sectarian squabbles or hinting at a return to theocracy.

I shall argue that such analyses run into problems because their conception of religion is too narrow. First, taking Rawls as a case in point, I suggest that his and his followers' attempts to model a realm of public debate from which religious values are excluded rely on too constricted a notion of religion. Indigenous Australian land-based religious traditions offer an example of religious "comprehensive doctrine" which cannot, without doing violence to its very structure, be kept out of public debate, for example about the protection of sacred sites; but they are nevertheless sources of cultural and social meaning which many liberals would want to see as having a legitimate place in a diverse society.

Second, such theorists cast too narrow a net in their analysis of the connections between religious and other kinds of meaning systems, and especially of the relationship between meaning systems and the world of material interactions of which they try to make sense. As a result, they largely overlook the metaphysics of economic expansion which lies at the heart of the supposedly secular capitalist state. The apparently odd inclusion of market ideology under the heading of metaphysics gains some support from a consideration of its language and imagery, but more from looking at the structural position which it occupies vis-a-vis other meaning systems

in capitalist society.

As a way into these issues, I shall begin to sketch an outline of various ways in which modern states deliberately try to exclude religious assumptions, symbols, authorities and so on from their political and legal structure.

## State atheism

One response to religion by a would-be secular state is to outlaw, or at least strongly discourage, religion of any but the most privatised sort, as occurred in the former Soviet Union. Formally, such moves have sometimes been interpreted as an attempt to put atheism in the position that a state religion once held. In practice, however, excising religious symbols and public practices from a society where they have once held a central place seems to create holes which demand positive rather than negative content. In her cross-cultural study of motherhood, *Ourselves as Mothers*, Sheila Kitzinger describes an ersatz 'baptismal' ceremony - complete with piped music, stained glass and ritual incantations - for a baby leaving hospital and being launched into its life as a Soviet citizen:

The meeting of a father and other members of the family with a newborn child, treated as a private and intimate event in Western countries, became in Communist society a formal and ritual entry into the culture, one in which the baby was symbolically exhorted, long before there was any possibility of understanding, to be a good citizen, and in which the parents were reminded of their duties to train the child well. (Kitzinger, 1992:125)

In a similar vein, former East Germany provided a state rite of passage for teenagers, described (by someone who had refused it) as a 'communist confirmation' - a parallel reflected not only in the ceremonial structure and commemorative family photographs but also by the fact that those who failed to observe it found it harder than those who did to gain access to the rights of an adult member of the community.

Not only the cycles of individual lives, but also communal cycles of production and rest are subjected to reinterpretation: from revolutionary France to Soviet Russia and Communist China, superstition-hunting authorities have tried to wrench the week, month and year free from their agrarian and ritual associations, replacing the cyclic observation of the Sabbath and commemoration of the saints with industrial, religionless patterns (the French revolutionary ten-day week, the Soviet five-day week with a staggered day off) and commemoration of state events (May Day, China's Red Army Day) (Symons, 1992:204; Walzer, 1983:195). Whether we look at personal rites of passage or at massive May Day celebrations, it becomes apparent that not atheism, but deification of the state comes, in such self-consciously corporatist secularism, to take the place of old-fashioned religion.

## Two liberal neutralities

### The wall of separation

To liberals, while the state should absent itself from religious controversy, it must certainly not go so far as to seek religion's active overthrow. Religious freedom, as Locke argued forcefully in the *Letter Concerning Toleration* and as numerous English dissenters had argued less famously before him, is best preserved in a state in which 'the care of souls cannot belong to the civil magistrate' (1895 [1689]:148). Indeed, from the secular, liberal state's refusal to take sides on matters of religion comes its guarantee of neutrality on other matters of conviction about the nature of a good life and thus its capacity to accommodate difference of many kinds<sup>1</sup>.

This separation tends to be interpreted by modern, liberal states in either of two ways - or, frequently, in both at different moments. The first way is what D. E. Smith, in his study of Indian secularism, calls the 'wall of separation', where the state simply refuses to have anything at all to say on any religious question. In this model, people are quite free to hold personal religious views, but must leave them behind when they take part in public debate; and they cannot look to the state to preserve religious institutions or uphold religious values, unless those institutions and values can be justified in some entirely non-religious way (eg Audi 1989 & 1991).

Yet in making that demand, a paradox arises. As Smith notes in the Indian context:

Paradoxically, the secular state, in order to establish its sovereignty and confirm its secularity, is required to undertake the most basic possible reform of religion. It is called upon by the Constitution to strip Hinduism and Islam of the socio-legal institutions which have distinguished them as total ways of life, to reduce these two great religious systems to their core of private faith, worship and practice. (1963:498)

I have argued elsewhere that the same dilemma arises at least as strongly in the secular state's relations with indigenous Australian religious traditions: the western liberal model of state neutrality has its origins in the need to allow freedom for different strands of English Protestantism, a family of religious inclinations which almost uniquely (at least apart from quietist and anti-world 'sect-type' movements<sup>2</sup>) lend themselves to privatised and internalised understandings of the relation between religious belief and the wider world (M. Maddox 1997; 1998)<sup>3</sup>. For religious traditions other than Anglophone Protestantism to accommodate themselves to a secular state, they find themselves expected to take on some of the more privatising tendencies of that family of beliefs. We might see this approach as running into a specific, religious version of the dilemma which confronts libertarian, 'hands-off' models of the state on a number of fronts: namely, that what might appear to be a strong assertion of neutrality in practice can be interpreted as a strong endorsement for the already-

powerful and an abandoning of the weak.

### **The even-handed helper**

The second way in which a secular liberal state can try to maintain its religious neutrality is by providing succour impartially to all the religious traditions found among its citizens. A straightforward example can be found in the recent decision by the University of Technology, Sydney, to add a Buddhist monk to its existing team of Christian, Jewish and Muslim chaplains.

Such a direct 'equal time' approach to impartiality may not always be possible: providing equal respect or consideration for different traditions may mean, in practice, that some must be treated differently. Proponents of a model which sees the state as even-handed helper of all may find themselves impelled at times to stretch the concept of impartiality far enough to accommodate limited forms of differential treatment. An analogy here might be with affirmative action programs, in which some kind of differential treatment is deemed necessary in certain circumstances, so as to bring about greater equality in the long run.

Instances of such slightly more involved interpretations of state neutrality can be found notably in some USA cases involving freedom of religion. In *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, for example, the court concluded that for Old Order Amish members' freedom of religion to be preserved, it was necessary for the state to bend its rules about compulsory high school education, allowing children from that community to leave school at an age when all other children would still be compelled to attend. In such cases, state neutrality means not a 'wall of separation', but a responsibility on the state to protect various traditions' religious distinctiveness (see Galston 1995).

Defenders of a high wall of separation would contend that even the most even-handed helper has abandoned its responsibility to stay out of religious debates; while advocates of even-handedness would reply that no real wall can maintain effective separation: generalising from Smith's example, the harder the state tries to stay out of religion, the more it finds itself engaged in de facto religious reform.

## **Political liberalism and state neutrality**

Perhaps the strongest contemporary statement of state neutrality as the way to accommodate difference comes in John Rawls's "political liberalism" (1995). Rawls's approach builds on the "wall of separation" model, but attempts to incorporate as much room as possible for the flourishing of difference. This leads him to develop an interestingly nuanced account of what it means for religious and political concerns to be held apart.

Trying to avoid the construction of an all-encompassing world view, Rawls presents his position as a limited theory within which actual political dilemmas can be worked through. Citizens in a plural, democratic society will have different, often incompatible "comprehensive doctrines", religious, moral and philosophical, which

guide their private decision-making; but when they enter the public realm, they join a “political conception” which holders of reasonable comprehensive doctrines can endorse (1996:154-156). Rawls postulates a “public reason” accommodating an “overlapping consensus” of reasonable political conceptions. The best political system reflects “the essentials of a democratic regime”, because that can be endorsed by “reasonable comprehensive doctrines”; and a reasonable comprehensive doctrine is one which can endorse such a regime. Any which do not are “unreasonable and irrational”, or “even mad”; society’s task is “to contain them” (1996:xix).

Leaving to one side the apparent circularity of this position, with its comfortable account of what makes a comprehensive doctrine “reasonable”, we may note other difficulties. A comprehensive doctrine may give rise to political conceptions which are fundamentally at variance with public reason, and yet be something which many liberals would stop short of calling “unreasonable and irrational” or “mad”. Consider a religious tradition which locates spiritual significance not in a cognitive activity of believing which takes place inside the minds of believers (as in the Protestant model of privatised religion), but in the relationship between people and land. Suppose that commercial interests threaten serious damage to the land. Adherents of such a religious tradition cannot, without doing violence to its structure, participate in a public reason in which religious belief is supposed to stand apart from political conceptions. Their reasons for wanting the land’s condition preserved just are religious; and yet those religious conceptions are not able to be bracketed, as political liberalism and its parent, the Protestant ‘state neutrality’ model, require. On the contrary, such religious conceptions extend into the material world. For the state to pronounce that they should not would mean that, far from remaining neutral with respect to religion, it would be imposing its own religious reformation, remaking indigenous traditions in the Protestant image.

We can see this clearly in actual disputes. When such disputes erupt, commentators and polemicists of the right frequently give the impression that it is self-evident that all religious, moral and philosophical conceptions belong in the realm of the head rather than of the material world. In fact, however, western epistemologies acknowledge any number of conceptions whose location extends from the mind into the landscape or into tangible objects; probably the most basic is property rights, but one can readily think of others.

The salient difference for the present argument is that the forms of **religion** familiar to a society like 1990s Australia and like Rawls’s America, shaped by modern secularism nourished from Protestant roots, have grown used to conceiving themselves as removed from the material world, at least in the first instance. The religious conceptions of a land-based tradition, by contrast, have (in this limited and specific sense, namely, their capacity to extend from the mental landscape into the physical) more in common with some non-religious conceptions in western thought. They do not remain in the head; they stretch out into the land.

Doctrines which do not remain in the head but extend into the material world

are hard to keep out of political debate - for example, about how material resources should be allocated. Yet many liberals would want to preserve indigenous and other 'unbracketable' traditions, both for their importance to their own adherents and for the richness they contribute to the surrounding culture. They would feel that a range of reasons, from present-day respect to acknowledgment of the historical wrongs through which such traditions became marginalised in the first place, would prevent them endorsing Rawls's suggestion that comprehensive doctrines which cannot be bracketed from the process political contestation are unreasonable, irrational or mad.

Rawls does not, of course, develop his argument along the lines canvassed here, and certainly makes no explicit charge of madness against indigenous traditions. His generally 'hands-off' approach makes concessions to the 'welfarist' or more intentionally interventionist liberal position by blending freedom with safeguards for the weakest through the exercise of public reason. Yet, although attempting to make room for diversity, the example of land-based traditions suggests that his conception of public reason itself is undermined by its limited assumptions about the nature of religion.

## **What is a comprehensive doctrine?**

If political liberalism's conception of religion is too thin to accommodate the actual diversity of religious traditions, then a broader question emerges. If the aim is to remove "reasonable comprehensive doctrines" from the arena of political debate (so as to preserve their integrity outside it while allowing for overlapping public consensus inside it), what counts as a "doctrine"? Rawls offers the gloss that such views include the religious, moral and philosophical; but their relation to the material world in which political negotiation takes place is never made clear. Training our attention on the religious element of Rawls's triad, and leaving the philosophical and moral for another day, the example of land-based traditions suggests further challenges.

Can a comprehensive doctrine have the real-world effect of requiring actual landscapes to be maintained in their present form, or does religious "doctrine" refer only to beliefs about the ancestor spirits who may be said to inhabit the landscape? Proponents of such a tradition might answer that the ancestor spirits' being is inseparable from the physical geography, and from the living community whose members are its custodians. In that case, the concept of "doctrine" would have to be extended beyond its usual, noetic sense to include the conditions for the physical preservation of the landscape and the flourishing of the community.

But if that is so, cannot the hypothetical developers in such a story make a comparable claim? Perhaps they, too, could be said to hold a comprehensive moral and philosophical doctrine deserving consideration (whether it can be called religious is the question to which I shall turn below). They might appeal to a metaphysics of economic expansion which says that development is always an overriding good, not

only for them but for the whole community. If the beliefs of one group can be said to extend into the material world while still deserving respect as doctrines which merit respect in a plural polity, then why not those of their opponents? Yet the second set of beliefs is seldom treated as a metaphysics; it is just common sense, the reality of market forces, the way the world works. Economic growth and the ideology which promotes it are considered so foundational to capitalist societies that they hardly seem in need of any defence. Arguments about indigenous heritage protection are presented by their proponents as an attempt to claw back just a little of the authority which is otherwise invested by default in economic development. Yet when such arguments are couched in terms of the need to protect the integrity of religious doctrines even when they necessarily intersect with the material world, the same form of argument appears, superficially at least, to offer even more aid and comfort to defenders of the economic status quo.

A defender of Rawls's position might reply here that to criticise it in this way is to confound the ideal and the real. Rawls's political liberalism is not meant to describe the world as it is, but only as it might go about fleshing out his conception of "justice as fairness". It is not Rawls's fault, the defender might say, if a particular ideology of economic expansion has caught on in the world and is taking up more space in public reason than it is entitled to. Indeed, Rawls has said that "justice as fairness" does not judge between capitalist and socialist economies as such (1973:274); we should not blame it for capitalism's present hold on the public imaginary. But that is just the problem: the divide which Rawls assumes between the doctrines through which people decide or find their position in relation to public reason and the material world within which that reason operates is predicated on a particular understanding of what makes a religious, philosophical or moral commitment. When we push that understanding only a little way, the divide no longer seems sustainable.

## **Early liberalism's unconscious religion**

Few societies demonstrate the tensions inherent in a secular division between state and religion more clearly than the United States. To the historical memories of certain states' founding commitments to various kinds of (more or less inclusive) freedom of conscience, the USA has added the at times volatile mixture of constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and a robust civil religion. Delving into the roots of this concoction, William Connolly notes Tocqueville's observation that "Religion, which never intervenes directly in the government of American society, should therefore be considered as the first of their political institutions" (Tocqueville, quoted in Connolly 1995:169). Connolly glosses Tocqueville:

Separation of church and state does not render the state neutral with respect to religion, nor does it sanction significant religious diversity ... Rather, [it] allows monotheism to install its effects in the hearts of the people and the presumptions of their institutions below the level of political debate. The mores of civilization

precede, ground, pervade, and restrict politics. Removing them from the clash and clang of politics preserves the sanctity of civilized religion and sets the boundaries of pluralism in the civi-theo-territorial culture. Separation of church and state enables Christian monotheism to form the first “political institution” above the fray of politics. (1995:169-170)

Here, then, is a further model of state secularism, one in which religion is contained “above” (or, in Connolly’s metaphor, “below”) politics, while remaining essential to it. Tocqueville’s America and the various homes of intentional state atheism offer examples which challenge the assumptions of state secularism. In these instances, the apparently secular state is anything but: there is no such thing as an empty centre.

### **Late liberalism’s unconscious religion**

Late modern liberal societies owe something to the English Revolution, and something to Revolutionary France; they owe something to the traditions of early-nineteenth century America which Tocqueville observed; if mostly negatively, they also have debts to their communist *bêtes noires*. The lesson of attempts to distance the state from religion in each suggests that, without forgetting the differences, we should not too quickly accept any diagnosis of late modern, liberal societies as successfully secular. Instead, taking a cue from Connolly, it may be instructive to ask what, for them, occupies a structural position “in the hearts of the people and the presumptions of their institutions, below the threshold of political debate”.

Tipped off by the story of the developers and indigenous sacred heritage, we can find evidence of such a submerged theology in a variety of places. If Tocqueville’s America achieved a separated state only by ignoring its foundation in Christian monotheism, and if the atheistic state replaces old-fashioned religion with self-deification, the liberal capitalist state seems to offer the same structural position to the ideology of market economics.

Of course, denunciation of the quest for commercial gain as a pseudo-religion has been part of the stock-in-trade of religious and social reformers at least since the Hebrew prophets’ exhortations to place economic restitution ahead of financial gain, and certainly well before Jesus’ more direct exhortations that one “cannot serve God and wealth” and his expulsion of money-changers from the temple.

From another quarter, in what he thought, in 1944, was a requiem for free-market economics, Karl Polanyi developed an extended metaphor to describe the competitive market system as having “a claim to universality unparalleled since the age when Christianity started on its career, only this time the movement was on a purely material level” (1944:130). In this system, “The middle class fulfilled their function by developing an all but sacramental belief in the universal beneficence of profits” (133). “Economic liberalism ... evolved into a veritable faith in man’s secular salvation through a self-regulating market”, while “the liberal creed assumed its



evangelical fervour only in response to the needs of a fully-deployed market economy” (135). Polanyi, whose interests are in economic history rather than religion, stops short of saying that the market is a religious phenomenon. The nearest he comes to such a suggestion is his closing comparison between socialism and fascism, on one hand, and market liberalism on the other. The difference, he says, is “moral and religious” rather than “economic”, in that in the former two world-views “the reality of society is accepted with the finality with which the knowledge of death has moulded human consciousness” (258A), while a competitive market society sees society as an obstacle to freedom which must therefore be “liquidated” (165).

I wish to argue something less bold than Biblical denunciators, and more precise than Polanyi: namely, that in the supposedly secular, proceduralist state, money is a strong enough organising principle to make any claim to an empty centre illusory. Polanyi, along with a majority of commentators from various disciplines, accepts the assumption that free market economics is only **like** a religion, because it operates on a “purely material level”, while religion operates elsewhere (where, is less often specified). However, it is not at all clear that free market economics is restricted to the material; quite the reverse, it has a substantial ideal content. One way to test the claim that it belongs to the same family of meaning-systems as old-fashioned religion is by subjecting the ideology of economic expansion to the classical materialist critiques of religion. Doing so, it becomes arguable that economic liberalism fits the materialists’ descriptions, if anything, more closely than today’s systems which are conventionally identified as religious.

Taking first Feuerbach’s projection theory of religion, we might conclude that in the modern, proceduralist state, it is market ideology which fits most accurately: the market, which is really a human creation, is unconsciously imagined into a real thing of which human beings then become the objects. It is described as active - rising or falling, plunging or recovering; the subject of emotions - jittery, nervous, buoyant or confident; sometimes able to be calmed, or altered on its course, by human intervention, but often responding in unpredictable ways or acting according to its own caprice. It demands a restructuring of the rhythms of social and family life, and forms the focus of a comprehensive doctrine so pervasive that it can go unnoticed as its position at the centre of the ‘secular’ public imaginary is declared vacant.

Whereas for Marx, borrowing and intensifying Feuerbach’s projection theory, religion was the paradigmatic example of the inversion of which economics and the state are two more examples (see eg Kee 1990), for the modern, proceduralist state, free market ideology is the paradigm. It is the ideology of the market which can be described as the “reversed world-consciousness” of a “reversed world”, as “the general theory of that world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in a popular form, its spiritualistic *point d’honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn completion, its universal ground for consolation and justification” (Marx 1955:41). In contemporary, liberal, secular Australia, the family of meaning systems which

are usually called 'religion' amount to curiosities beside the thoroughgoing inversion of market ideology which structures increasing amounts of public reason. Indeed, Polanyi's assertion that a competitive market system mimics Christianity but "on a purely material level" distracts attention from the thoroughness of the inversion: what appear to be material considerations are in fact part of an ideological structure in which need or desire in the material world run a poor second.

To take just one recent example, consider the current federal government's review of the *Affirmative Action (Equal Opportunity for Women) Act 1986*. It is being assessed, not for its effectiveness as a social justice measure, but as part of a larger process of reviewing Australian legislation which might have an impact on business's "competitiveness". The intriguing thing about the review is not so much that it should be undertaken in those terms as that the Issues Paper to which submissions are supposed to respond does not draw any distinction between "social justice" and "competition" as different classes of outcomes. Instead, it either ignores the idea that there might be a second criterion by which legislation could be judged (other than its effect on competitiveness), or else assumes that both aims can be served by the same legislation in the same way, without conflict. Competition in the market, in other words, is conceived as "moral sanction, solemn completion, universal ground for consolation and justification".

As the atheistic state tries to replace religious rhythms and festivals with a seasonal round in its own image, so does the capitalist state. Industry groups such as the Business Council of Australia and the Confederation of Australian Industry have long lobbied for the abolition of weekends and holidays (Symons 1988:151). As a pre-Prime Ministerial John Howard put it in launching his party's industrial relations policy in 1992,

If someone makes a capital investment in this country, they ought to be able to run that capital investment 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, without penalty. (Quoted Brett 1996)

At the output end, this shift to a perpetual working week is signalled in the loss of penalty rates for working (what used to be) after hours and weekends, while from the consumers' end extended shopping hours mean that there is never a break from the duty to keep the retail spending figures up. The removal of scheduled rest days which interfere with the ceaseless cycle of production and consumption is paralleled by the commercialisation of old festivals, and the creation of new, marketing-based celebrations such as Fathers Day.

## **The capitalist, proceduralist state and old-fashioned religion**

Perhaps paradoxically, one way to see clearly the degree to which public reason is structured around a core of market ideology is by investigating its attitude to old-

fashioned religion. A good example is the fate of theology in Australian universities. Early in Australia's academic history, a degree of rapprochement existed between universities and religion. Sydney University, inaugurated in 1852, became home to the teaching of Presbyterian theological students under the *St Andrew's College Act* 1867 (Barnes and Ridings 1998:151), and began offering its own post-graduate Bachelor of Divinity in the 1930s (Chisholm 1963:81). To the south, the Melbourne College of Divinity was constituted by its own Act of Parliament in 1910 (Melbourne College of Divinity 1996-7:i). Thereafter, however, theological education was generally set up in institutions and according to curricula determined by churches, with academics paid out of church funds. As the state university system expanded, it remained chary of association with theological education; state sponsorship of theology (for example, as on the German model) was seen as a dangerous lunge away from state secularism.

The 1980s and 1990s, however, saw a new generation of universities throw open their corridors to theology schools. You can now take a degree in Christian theology at Flinders, Murdoch, Charles Sturt or Griffith Universities. In 1993, the Melbourne College of Divinity became affiliated with the University of Melbourne (in whose residential colleges it is housed); the Sydney College of Divinity is developing associations with the University of Western Sydney and Charles Sturt University, as well as continuing to support the teaching of higher degrees in theology at Sydney University (the Sydney BD is no longer offered). The explanation is not to be found in any sudden thirst for theological insight among university administrations but in the increasing focus of universities on 'industry links': church-run colleges have been able to sell themselves to universities as providers of vocational education for a ready-made market. Any commitment to secularism crumbles before the stronger commitment to income generation.

This displacement of the principle of secular education by the faith of the market can lead to further strange paradoxes. For example, at the state-funded University of South Australia, a non-sectarian degree program in Religion Studies has offered for the last couple of decades (through various institutional name changes and restructures) courses in comparative religion, philosophy of religion and ethics. Academic staff over the years have included those with strong personal religious commitments in various traditions and those who professed no religious adherence. Whatever their personal religious or non-religious leanings, all have tried to encourage in students a spirit of open-minded inquiry. The main client group for degrees and diplomas has been Roman Catholic school teachers, studying in order to teach religious education in Roman Catholic schools. To qualify for this purpose, courses must be approved by the Catholic Education Office, and that approval depends upon, *inter alia*, approval of the lecturers. And while the Catholic Education Office is quite happy for any qualified academic to teach its students the basics of Buddhism, say, or to guide them through sociological or philosophical theories of religion, my experience as a member of staff for five years was that certain 'core' subjects, like

systematic theology and biblical studies, could only be taught by an approved (usually Catholic) teacher.

Consequently, non-Catholic staff with qualifications in various fields of theology were liable to find themselves unable to teach in their areas of expertise. While academics in principle retained autonomy over their own course content (subject to the usual processes of external review and accreditation), in practice the need for some courses to be approved for inclusion in a fee-paying Graduate Certificate in Catholic Studies saw instructions given, on at least one occasion, to modify course content to fit more closely with the magisterium's preferred approach. Academic independence in a state university gave way before the connection between EFTSUs and dollars. Intervention in curriculum came not because of any commitment to Roman Catholic orthodoxy on the part of the university administration or government, but, on the contrary, was made possible by the fact that the university's separation from the institutions of old-fashioned religion had progressed so far that churches could be seen as just another industry. Meanwhile, the wider society's "logic in a popular form, its spiritualistic *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn completion, its universal ground for consolation and justification" made academic enquiry answerable to the new orthodoxy of accountants' tallies.

This theology of the market means that, presumably, the university would have been equally happy to offer doctrinally-based and religiously-sanctioned courses in any other religion's theology, if a sufficient market had offered. Yet the intervention in curriculum, and qualified academics' inadmissibility as teachers in their fields of expertise, indicate that the market's agnosticism on matters of old-fashioned faith does not denote an 'empty centre', but rather, a centre firmly occupied by a value system which can accommodate what pays.

To summarise, the two approaches which I have identified in the 'secular liberal' family of interpretations of the possible relationships between the state and religious traditions and institutions run into problems. The 'wall of separation' model paradoxically makes the state an agent of religious reform, espaliering the traditions it encounters so that they can be contained on the opposite side of the wall. A model which tries to peek over the wall far enough to encourage the flourishing of religious diversity faces dilemmas about which traditions to compost, which to prune and which to let wither or be damaged by pests.

Further, any analysis which takes place purely at the culturalist and ideological level of most discussions of sacred-secular distinctions risks overlooking the fact that their framework comes from a particular religious tradition, namely, Protestantism. It is a tradition which has taken to the highest level of refinement its capacity for being wrenched free from any material reference; and one which has enjoyed a degree of historical privilege within the societies out of which the principle of secularism has grown, such that its own material commitments are able to be overlooked, sinking into the cultural background and being taken for granted as natural. Most religious traditions do not share Protestantism's capacity for removal

from material commitments; and, figuring in liberal, secular societies as Other (if not as downright mad), their material commitments stand out from the cultural background, demanding attention and threatening disruption.

This threatened disruption presses most nearly when it throws into relief the real “comprehensive doctrine” through which the culture and public reason of proceduralist, secular society are formed, namely, the ideology of the market.

## **Postscript: philosophy of religion in search of a home**

In recent years, philosophy of religion has turned a critical eye on itself, and, if the number of proposals for self-improvement is any guide, has found itself wanting.

Ninian Smart has suggested an “extension” of philosophy of religion away from a preoccupation with Christian theism and even beyond the study of religions themselves, to “the philosophy of worldviews” (1995). Imagining an opportunity to “rearrange academe”, Smart envisages “chunks of anthropology, the history of ideas, sociology, area studies, iconography and religious studies grouped together”, surmounted at a “higher” logical level” by “the reflection on world views which would constitute quite a large slice of philosophy” (1997:10).

Smart’s program is not shared by Michael Levine, who nevertheless agrees in seeing “contemporary ‘analytic’ Christian philosophy of religion” as a “moribund and isolated field within philosophy, a field as inbred as the Spanish Bourbons” (Levine, 1997: 11). For Levine, relief is already in sight in the form of “cross-cultural philosophy of religion as practised” (1997: 20), but it still shares in “the methodological disarray that currently afflicts, and is seen to be undermining, the history of religions, comparative philosophy, and religious studies generally”. Far from alleviating such disarray, Levine sees in Smart’s suggestions “further evidence” of it (Levine 1997: 22).

Following from the argument in this paper, I want to suggest that one fruitful way for philosophy of religion to understand itself is in conversation with political philosophy. From political philosophy’s side, it can be pointed out that in the history of western reflections about the nature of a good and just society, religious language and assumptions have seldom been very far away (G. Maddox 1996). Even when political philosophers deliberately try to distance themselves from religious considerations and produce explicitly secular theory, the concepts of secularism which frame such discussions paradoxically owe their genesis to a particular set of theological developments: modern secularism cannot dust off the Reformation’s fingerprints (M. Maddox 1996, 1997). From religion’s side, I suggest that debates about the proper pattern of relations between the state and religious institutions provide a vantage-point from which philosophers of religion might see a path which could lead beyond Bourbonesque introspection or reliving family battles past.

To do so, philosophy of religion would need to move beyond the ocular metaphor implied in Smart’s appeal to a philosophy of worldviews. A viewer stands at a distance

from the viewed object, and can penetrate no further than its surface. As long as such metaphors persist, religion and associated meaning systems will continue to be understood according to the noetic model which, I have suggested, allows important areas to be overlooked.

While philosophers of religion have lamented their discipline's retreat into metaphysical abstraction, similar complaints have come from some political philosophers (eg Barber 1988), who argue that the quest for seamless theory which has characterised much political thought has little to do with the real world of "reflective disequilibrium", which, parodying Rawls, he sees as the arena in which political interactions take place.

Yet, at their best, both religion and politics have their feet firmly in that very disequilibrium. Both are to do with people's deepest commitments and profoundest longings, and with the criticism of what is, even if we cannot be entirely sure what should be. Both are periodically said to have fallen into decay, or to have lost their relevance to the modern world; certainly, both have lost authority before the colonising theology of the market. The retreat into theoretical abstraction which critics have seen in recent political philosophy and philosophy of religion might be understood in part as a reaction to this loss of authority; perhaps scholasticism offers a more manageable alternative to the messy realities in which their subjects deal. If this is so, conversation between the two might offer a promising way back to engagement.

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## Notes

1. For conventional statements of this view of religious neutrality as the ground of other liberal freedoms, see eg Kymlicka 1995; Galston 1995:518.
2. The distinction is from Troeltsch 1960 [1908-11].

3. I am not suggesting that Protestantism necessarily refuses engagement with the world - see, among numerous sources, the papers by Dutney, R. Smith and G. Maddox in this volume. Rather, I am arguing that Protestantism's emphasis on the cognitive activities of belief over other forms of religious expression (such as ritual, mythic and so on) allow, at times, for a privatised interpretation. This division remains, even when the content of the beliefs has a social focus: a Protestant, asked to justify her social activism, would be quite likely to reply something like, "I act this way because I *believe* that that is what God requires of me". If pressed, she might elaborate, "My study of the Bible and of my denomination's tradition has led me to *decide* that this is the right thing to do". It is this cognitive emphasis in the structure of Protestant piety, rather than any particular content about the rightness or wrongness of social engagement, which I identify as critical to the project of separating religion from political process.