

**The Case for Secularism: a Neutral State in an Open Society**

**Richard Norman**

Consider the following statement from a Bishop of the Church of England:

British society is based on a Christian vision and Christian values.  Its institutions, its laws, its customs, all these arise out of a Christian vision.  And this is the best basis to have an open and welcoming society where other people can make their contribution, not some kind of lowest common denominator mish-mash... There are certain basic values to identify in British life which come from a Christian vision.  For instance, the dignity of all human beings is clearly drawn from the Biblical idea that human beings are made in God’s image.  Or it might be the question of equality, or it might be liberty, freedom of expression.  All these things are under threat..., not just for individuals but also for vital social institutions... Unless people know what the springs are that feed our values, the whole thing will dry up... We may already be living on past capital, where we have some sense of values but don’t know why we have them... If there’s a clearer Christian basis to society which is acknowledged, the result will be a better basis for a more inclusive society, a better basis for welcoming people than a kind of secularist lowest common denominator.[i]

As a historical claim this has some truth.  The framework of belief which shaped British culture was for many centuries overwhelmingly Christian.  Quite what the values were which flowed from this ‘Christian vision’ is more debatable.  Equality, liberty, and freedom of expression?  Perhaps, but the Christian vision has also been invoked to justify hierarchy, oppression, and social control. Christianity has been the dominant culture, so it is unsurprising that it has supplied the vocabulary of both sides in most significant moral and social divisions.  Those who worked for the abolition of the slave trade argued their case in terms of Christian values – and so did the slave-traders.  Many of those who sought to improve the atrocious working conditions in factories and mines invoked Christian values – and so did the factory owners and mine owners.  Some at least of those who campaigned for greater equality of opportunity, for the extension of the franchise, or for the emancipation of women, or an end to racial discrimination, invoked Christian values, and so did those who defended what they saw as a divinely ordained and unchangeable hierarchy of status and inequality.

However, our primary purpose here is not with the historical claim, but with what follows from it.  The Bishop argues that because Christianity has historically been the dominant culture, our society is essentially, and must remain, a Christian society.  That does not follow.  He argues that Christianity can and should provide the best basis for an inclusive society.  That is the claim we want to contest. We shall argue that an inclusive society is, in the sense to be defined, a *secular* society.

**What is secularism?**

Why should a society not base itself on a shared religion, which provides its members with shared values and a shared source of inspiration and common endeavour?  In principle that is acceptable, as long as the religion really is shared.  That was the form taken by many of the communities of settlers in the New World who were escaping persecution in their country of origin and wanted a place where they could practise their religion together.  If people choose to constitute themselves as what we might call a ‘theocratic society’, in which a shared religion governs the lives of all its members, and is the basis of political authority and a moral code, and if they can do so without being a threat to other societies, then in principle they should be free to do so.

The idea of a theocratic society becomes problematic, however, as soon as the religion is contested.  And that is very likely to happen.  The original founders of a religious community may all be fully committed to their religion, but in future generations there will probably be individuals who question it.  If the community is a small self-contained society and if dissenting individuals are genuinely free to leave, it may continue as a theocratic society.  No modern large-scale society, however, will be one in which a single religion is universally shared and uncontested.  Certainly Britain in the twenty-first century is not like that.  There has long been a free-thinking tradition in this country which has questioned religious belief, and more recently, with successive waves of immigration, many non-Christian religions have deep roots in our society and often have a dominant role in particular local communities.  With universal education, people think for themselves about whether to accept any system of religious belief, rather than inheriting it unquestioningly from their parents and their culture.  A large proportion, perhaps even a majority, of the population have no religious belief, and certainly a large majority have no commitment to religious practice or observance.  How can such a society elicit the free and willing cooperation of its members, without excluding or marginalising any section of society?  The obvious answer is that it should be *neutral* as between different faiths and beliefs.  And that is what we mean by a ‘secular’ society.

To avoid possible misunderstanding it may be more appropriate to talk about a secular *state* rather than a secular ‘society’.  A secular state is not an atheist state.  It does not seek to impose atheist beliefs and institutions.  On the contrary, a secular state is one which protects the right of all its citizens to hold their own beliefs, religious or non-religious or anti-religious, and protects the right of believers to practise their religion.  A society governed by a secular state is therefore not a society dominated by secular beliefs and values *in contrast to* religious beliefs and values.  It is not the ‘godless’ society which some religious believers imagine and fear.  A frequent source of confusion on this whole topic is the variety of meanings attached to the word ‘secularism’.  The term is sometimes used to refer to a position which is committed to the elimination of all religious institutions and all religious values.  That is not how we are using the term and it is not the position we are defending.  We are using the word ‘secularism’ to refer to the view which has traditionally been described as the separation of church and state.  Since the word ‘church’ is normally applied to Christian institutions, that definition needs to be up-dated in contemporary society to refer to the separation of state institutions from all religious practices and institutions.  That is what we are talking about.

A society governed by a secular state is therefore a *diverse* society, one in which religious and non-religious views can all find a hearing and in which different individuals and groups can all make their case for their own beliefs.  It is what has sometimes been called an *open society*.  Precisely in order to protect that openness, a secular state is one which is even-handed between different systems of faith and belief, while resisting the attempts of any group of believers to turn the state into a vehicle for, or to gain undue privileges for, their religion or their beliefs.  It is a state in which people’s participation in public institutions does not depend on their religious or anti-religious convictions.  In a world where people will inevitably continue to disagree on matters of religious belief, and where religious believers will continue to feel strongly about their competing religious allegiances, a secular state in this sense - a *neutral* state - is the only kind of state which can plausibly be seen to be in the common interest and which all can accept without feeling themselves to be the victims of discrimination or exclusion.  An initial and provisional definition of what we are advocating, then, is: a *neutral* state in an *open* society.

**Is neutrality possible?**

But is neutrality possible?  How can any society function without shared values?

One possible answer is to distinguish between the *public* space and *private* space, and between the different values which belong in those different spheres.  The shared values which govern the public space, it may be said, are those which enable people with different faiths and beliefs and different visions of the good life to live together in harmony.  Foremost among these is the value of tolerance, the willingness to accept differences and to allow others to hold their own beliefs and to follow their own ideals.  In this public space also belong essentially political values, the values of equal citizenship and liberal-democratic rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, the right to vote and to stand for public office, as well as the values of social justice such as equality of opportunity and the right to a fair share in the common resources of society.  In contrast, it may be said, the different and competing conceptions of the good life, which may or may not be rooted in a religious faith, belong in the private sphere.  People have different conceptions of how one should live one’s life and what constitutes a worthwhile life.  They may seek to accumulate material possessions, or to foreswear such things, or to devote themselves to the service of others, or to live for their god and fill their lives with religious observances.  They may have different and irreconcilable views about what to wear, what to eat and drink, and what kinds of sexual relations and activities are permissible or desirable.  Within particular voluntary communities such as churches and faith groups, people may accept the guidance of their leaders about how they should lead a good life, but the state, it may be said, should be neutral between these differing values and should not impose on everyone a single conception of the good life.

The public/private distinction has some merit, but it still leaves questions and problems.  First, in formulating that distinction haven’t we already assumed certain values which others may regard as contentious?  The values of tolerance and respect for diversity, of democratic rights and social justice, are, it may be said, specifically *liberal* values.  Some religious believers will share them; others almost certainly will not.  How, then, can we make a case for a neutral state without begging the question?  Why should someone committed to a religion which espouses non-liberal values accept that case?

Secondly, it may be asked, are liberal values enough?  Doesn’t a society need common values which go beyond simply tolerance and political rights?  If the members of a society are to work together for a common good, don’t they need to be inspired by a shared positive vision of a worthwhile human life?  The Bishop quoted above is scornful of the idea of basing society on ‘some kind of lowest common denominator mish-mash’.  A society, he thinks, needs positive and substantial values which can give substance to a shared communal life and which are rooted in a coherent vision – a shared ‘faith’.  And given the facts of its history, that vision for British society needs to be a Christian vision.

In order to tackle these questions we now want to look more closely at the case for secularism as we have defined it.  We shall consider in more detail how far we can make that case to those who do not themselves share our own humanist beliefs and values.  Why should religious believers accept that case, and how persuasive can it be?  We shall suggest that there is no single knock-down argument for secularism grounded in reasons which all religious believers can accept.  Rather, there is a range of arguments, and we shall distinguish three arguments in particular.  In our view all of them are good arguments which support the case for secularism, but they differ in the extent to which they are likely to be accepted by religious believers, and to some extent they may have differing implications for what secularism should mean in practice.  We shall first outline the arguments, and then look at their implications for problem cases.

**The argument from autonomy**

We want first to suggest that an argument based on liberal values is not necessarily as limited in its appeal as might be supposed.  Most of the main faiths have a liberal wing as well as a less liberal one, but beyond that, even religious opponents of liberalism may give at least some support to the value of *autonomy*.  By this we mean the importance of individuals making their own choices about the most important things in their own lives.

Some religions may, at some level, disparage the value of autonomy, equating it with a dangerous ‘permissiveness’ and advocating a strict adherence to the rules of the religion as laid down by priests or imams or rabbis or sacred texts.  But however highly they may esteem commitment to the true religion as the supremely important thing in life, they may well accept that such a commitment loses its value if it is not genuine and sincere.  Admittedly not all religious believers take that line; the Inquisition was quite happy to compel the mere outward show of faith by threatening to burn those who did not comply.  Nevertheless, someone who values real faith rather than an insincere profession of faith should accept that adherents to the faith need to understand what it is that they are committing themselves to, and that their commitment needs to be free and un-coerced.

This has traditionally been one of the main arguments for religious toleration.  Locke, in the seventeenth century, argued that dissenters should be tolerated because belief cannot be coerced.  You can coerce people into saying that they believe something, but you cannot coerce people into genuinely believing it.[ii]  Of course an argument for religious toleration is not yet an argument for a neutral state (nor was it seen as such in the seventeenth century).  Toleration of dissenters, and the absence of religious persecution, is logically compatible with the existence of an established church, with institutions of government which give a privileged position to the established religion, and with an education system which is dedicated to bringing up the young in the established faith.

Nevertheless, though such an arrangement may be consistent, a system in which the roles of church and state coalesce is liable to be one in which autonomy is eroded in practice.  If people are channelled into a profession of religious faith by the existence of an established church and the dominance of that church in the educational system, they are not exactly being coerced, but at the same time their faith is hardly a genuine commitment.  We can see this in a relatively innocuous way in our own society.  A large section of the population, when asked for their religious belief, will reply ‘C of E’ because that is the accepted answer.  We cannot think that the Anglican Church should attach much value to their reply.

The appeal to autonomy may, then, cut some ice with people who do not sign up to other liberal values.  Autonomy at the level of people’s fundamental choices of a way of life or a system of belief is consistent with the freedom for people to choose, if they wish, a life of total submission to God’s will.  A secular state would protect and nurture individuals’ capacity to make autonomous choices of their own way of life.  It would not compel them to choose a liberal life-style or to remain autonomous throughout their lives.  The case for secularism on grounds of autonomy is therefore one which many religious believers ought to be able to accept.

Likewise the value of free and open discussion may be recognised without having to be part of a complete liberal package.  People who want to see their church’s line on abortion or voluntary euthanasia or homosexuality reflected in legislation may still see the value of public debate to decide on the legislation and reach a consensus, rather than having it imposed by sheer political power.

Still, we recognise that arguments for a secular state which appeal to liberal values will not be universally persuasive, and that some religious believers will simply deplore any questioning or weakening of the authority of their church or faith.  Of course the liberal argument doesn’t end there.  The case for liberal values itself goes deeper, and can be backed up by further arguments, for example by facts about human nature and the conditions of human flourishing.[iii]  This is not the place to pursue the argument, however. We turn instead to other arguments for secularism, to consider how wide their appeal might be.

**The argument from fairness**

The other two arguments which we shall pursue rest more on facts about the particular character of our own society.  It is a pluralist society.  It includes adherents of many different religions, largely though not entirely because of the presence of communities whose ethnic and geographical origins link them to religions such as Islam and Hinduism.  It is also a society many of whose members have no religious belief.  Depending on how you measure religiosity, the proportion of the population which is non-religious may be anything from 16% to 60%.[iv]  In a mixed society such as ours, the different groups need to find some way of living together.  Ideally that means a way of living together which they can all agree on.  And given the diversity of religious and non-religious beliefs, what it would be reasonable for them to agree on would be an arrangement in which no one system of belief dominates or has a privileged position in the institutions and practices of the society.

This is an argument in the ‘social contract’ tradition of political thought.  Now a standard problem for any contract theory is that what people will agree on will depend on the starting-point from which they have to make the agreement.  If some start from a stronger bargaining position than others, they will be able to secure an agreement which gives greater weight to their own interests.  But that is not what we would intuitively think of as a fair agreement.  Within the social contract tradition the idea of a fair agreement has sometimes been articulated by asking what people could agree on from behind a ‘veil of ignorance’.  So, in the present case, we could engage in the following exercise of the imagination.  Suppose that people were placed behind such a veil of ignorance so that they didn’t know what religious or non-religious beliefs they would turn out to have.  What arrangements for the place of religious beliefs in society would it be rational for them to agree on?  If they were to opt for giving one particular religion or set of beliefs – perhaps the majority religion – a dominant role in society, they would run the risk that their own beliefs would turn out to be different from those of the dominant religion and would consequently be excluded or marginalised. The rational choice from behind the veil of ignorance would therefore be the choice of a society in which no religion or set of beliefs has a privileged position.[v]

Now of course, in deciding what kind of society we want, we are not actually behind a veil of ignorance.  That exercise of the imagination is simply a device with which to formulate the idea of a *fair* agreement.  It does not itself provide any additional reason *why* we should want a fair agreement.  But the appeal to fairness ought to carry weight.  In a society where there are many different religious and non-religious beliefs strongly held by different groups, people can recognise that it is unfair that any one set of beliefs should have a privileged position.  That, then, is an important and powerful argument for secularism.

**The pragmatic argument**

Not everyone, however, will accept the value of fairness in this context.  Some people, deeply committed to their own faith, may say ‘Why should I be fair to other religions?  They are deluded, they have rejected the one true god and the true faith.  And as for those who worship no god at all, they do not deserve fairness, they deserve only to reap the consequences of their godless way of life.’  Is there any argument for secularism which can be addressed to religious believers of this kind?

There is another version of the contract argument which is relevant here.  This is the strand in the social contract tradition which goes back to Hobbes.  It emphasises the disastrous consequences of not agreeing.  As Hobbes put it, a state of affairs in which people cannot agree on shared social arrangements is liable to be a state of war – a war of all against all.[vi]

This has sometimes been literally the case.  The history of many modern states has been characterised by intense religious strife.  The modern movement towards the separation of church and state grew out of the experience of the religious wars of the seventeenth century between Catholics and Protestants which devastated Europe and brought home the need for some kind of accommodation which would prevent further strife.  More recently we have seen decades of conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, war between Catholics and Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Yugoslavia, seemingly unending violence between Jews and Muslims and Christians in the Middle East, and the vicious conflict between different brands of Islam in Iraq – to mention just the most high-profile examples.  The lesson to be learned is that if people with different sets of religious and non-religious beliefs cannot learn to live together, the results are appalling for all parties.

Perhaps paradoxically, the pragmatic argument for secularism is strengthened by the fact of the particular intensity with which people are attached to their religious beliefs.  Such beliefs matter deeply to people.  They are beliefs which people are prepared to die for and to kill for.  That might at first seem to offer little prospect for a society in which different religions and beliefs coexist.  But if it is accepted that the intensity with which one group is attached to its religion is matched by the equal intensity with which other groups are attached to theirs, all parties may then come to recognise that if their differences degenerate into unresolved conflict, that conflict is likely to be peculiarly vicious and destructive.  It is therefore recognisably in the interests of all that the causes of such strife be removed.  And to a large extent this can be achieved by a society in which there is tolerance for different religious and non-religious beliefs and in which the state is neutral between all such beliefs.

The argument appeals to common interests, and it is possible that some believers will see their interests differently.  We know for instance that some Muslims in British society consider the position of the Church of England as the Established Church to be the lesser evil, preferable to disestablishment and the prospect of a ‘godless’ society.  We have to accept too that some believers embrace the prospect of religious conflict (of whatever sort, and in some cases even of violent conflict), confident that they will win because God is on their side.  The pragmatic argument will therefore not persuade everyone.  Nevertheless, some of those who may be unmoved by the argument that a neutral state is fair to everyone may at least come to see that a neutral state is in their interests, because it is preferable to unending and destructive conflict.

We have reviewed three arguments for secularism and a neutral state.  We think that they are good arguments and that between them they add up to a powerful case.  We have acknowledged that not everyone will be persuaded by them, but they are arguments which do not appeal to any specifically humanist premises or assumptions.  They are arguments which can as easily be accepted by religious believers as by atheists, and we hope that they will be.  We want to return now to our earlier questions, about how far neutrality is possible and what it should mean in practice.  Our three arguments will in some cases support different answers to those questions, and it will be useful to map them out.

**Public and private values**

The doubt about the possibility of neutrality was, we saw, fuelled by the thought that any society needs shared positive values.  We’ve suggested, in the context of our arguments for secularism, that at least some liberal values such as tolerance and respect and the nurturing of people’s capacity to make autonomous choices can be sufficiently widely shared to set the tone of an open society.  We noted also the question whether liberal values are enough.  If the members of a society are to work together for a common good, don’t they need to be inspired by a shared positive vision of a worthwhile human life?  That may be so, and the shared values are not hard to seek.  The values of mutual care and concern and cooperation are not specific to any particular religion or system of belief.  Changing the Bishop’s mathematical metaphor, we can look not for the lowest common denominator but for the highest common factor, the set of values which is at the core of every religious tradition and secular philosophy.  Humanists would say that these values transcend religious differences.  They can infuse public life in a secular society which remains neutral between different religious beliefs.

A secular state, then, is not ‘neutral’ in the sense of being devoid of values, but it is neutral in the sense that it is built on public values which are shared and are not specific to particular systems of religion or belief.  Beyond these public values, it will leave individuals free to pursue their own vision of personal well-being, but the fact that individuals are left to make their own choices does not mean that their lives will be shallow and superficial, as some critics of secularism tend to suggest.  Again, there is widespread agreement about the sorts of things which can contribute to a fulfilling personal life – intimate relationships, the pursuit of art and beauty, knowledge and self-knowledge, physical exercise, the enjoyment of the natural world, meaningful work and other creative accomplishments.  A secular state will enable individuals to pursue their own particular idea of a worthwhile life and also, if they wish, to devote themselves to some distinctively religious set of ideals provided that these do not lead them to inflict harm on others.[vii]

For many religious believers this will still seem to make too sharp a division between the public and the private.  They may see their devotion to the public values of mutual care and concern as inseparable from their religious commitment.  My faith, they may say, is not just confined to my private life, it motivates me in the public sphere and inspires me to try to help my fellow human beings and to work for a better world.  Like the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury and the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, they may emphasise the importance of ‘religiously inspired public engagement’ and maintain that ‘society can only flourish if faith is given space to make its contribution and its challenge’.[viii]

Again there need be no problem here.  Of course religious believers should be free to make their contribution to public life.  If their faith motivates them to work for peace and justice, to struggle against the evils of poverty and oppression and racial discrimination, or to protect the natural environment, then their contribution is to be welcomed.  All that a secular society requires is that they be willing to work alongside others who do not share their faith, and that their own religion should be given no special privileges or special status.

**The terms of public debate**

Religiously inspired contributions to public life are all very well, but what about contributions to public debate?  Many religious believers will say that it’s not enough just to work silently for the public good, they want to be open and explicit about their religious motivation, and they want that motivation to be explicit also in their participation in debates about more contentious moral and social issues – about abortion, or the legalisation of assisted dying, for instance.  They think it important to be able to say that *as Christians* or *as Muslims* they take a certain view of those issues, and they want their distinctively religious values and beliefs to carry weight as such in the public deliberation and decision-making.  Some advocates of secularism, in contrast, would say that public debate about such matters should be couched in purely secular terms, invoking only shared values and not appealing to ideas specific to a particular religion.  Here is a tension which we need to address.

Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, has distinguished between what he calls ‘programmatic secularism’ and ‘procedural secularism’.  Programmatic secularism, he says,

finds specific views of the human good outside a minimal account of material security and relative social stability unsettling, and concludes that they need to be relegated to the purely private sphere.[ix]

Williams’ response is an example of the view that this makes for too thin a version of the public sphere.  It underestimates the role of public reasoning in exploring and negotiating the differences between particular religious and non-religious perspectives.

By defining ideological and religious difference as if they were simply issues about individual preference, almost of private ‘style’, this discourse effectively denies the seriousness of difference itself…. Because there is no tribunal to adjudicate arguments between basic commitments about God, humanity and the universe, it is assumed that there is therefore no exchange possible between them, no work of understanding and discernment, no mapping of where common commitments start and stop.

In contrast, procedural secularism, which he appears to endorse, proposes

a situation in which – for example – religious convictions are granted a public hearing in debate; not necessarily one in which they are privileged or regarded as beyond criticism, but one in which they are attended to as representing the considered moral foundation of the choices and priorities of citizens.

The crucially ambiguous phrase here is: ‘*not necessarily* …privileged or beyond criticism’.  We would say that such religious convictions should be *not at all* privileged or beyond criticism.  If a particular church or religious group says, for instance, ‘This is our stance on abortion (or euthanasia, or whatever), and because it is based on religious convictions we think that the society has a special responsibility to respect it and to accommodate its legislation to our views’, that would be a demand for a privileged status.  If on the other hand a religious group’s views were to be a genuine contribution to public debate, they would have to be translatable into terms which others could understand and give rational weight to.

An example is the debate about the ‘Assisted Dying Bill’ which came before the House of Lords in 2006.  (This was not long before the Archbishop’s lecture and he may have had this case in mind.)  The churches and their representatives, including the Archbishop himself, participated very prominently in this debate, and their interventions were often cast in explicitly religious terms.  They would invoke, for instance, traditional religious ideas of ‘the sanctity of life’.  If such interventions are to be genuine contributions to public debate, then they have to look for common ground between talk of ‘the sanctity of life’ and other ways in which other sections of society have articulated the profound value of human life, and to explore in a genuine dialogue what such values mean and how they can appropriately be reflected in legislation which can be widely accepted.  If that is what ‘procedural secularism’ amounts to, there need be no great gulf between it and ‘programmatic secularism’, and it would be something which many of us could accept.

Sometimes religious interventions in the debate on the Assisted Dying Bill took that form.  Sometimes they did not.  Sometimes they amounted to a concerted campaign of lobbying in the press and other media simply to subvert the bill, with no account taken of the fact that it had clear majority support in the country.  And of course, when it came to the actual debate in the House of Lords, religious privilege was all too apparent, since the Anglican Church, with its reserved seats for Bishops in the House, was able to play a disproportionately dominant role in the debate and in the rejection of the legislation.  The place of Bishops in the House of Lords is a classic example of an arrangement which, on any version of secularism, is indefensible.[x]

**Conscientious objection**

Pressure from religious groups for a privileged status was apparent in another recent example of legislation.  The government recently enacted legislation making it illegal to discriminate, in employment, or in the provision of goods, facilities and services, against people because of their sexual orientation.  The Catholic Church in particular sought exemption from this legislation, arguing that they consider homosexual practices to be an evil and that they should not be forced to condone them by letting rooms to gay couples or helping gay couples to adopt a child.  Having to conform to the law would, they said, be a violation of their rights of conscience.

Now of course the Catholic Church like any other group was entitled to take part in the debate about that legislation, and it certainly did so.  But once the debate has taken place and the decision has been made, why should the Catholic Church have any special exemption?  Suppose that a hypothetical organisation, the Society of Homophobes, were to say ‘We want to be exempt from the legislation, because we think that homosexuality is an intolerable evil, and it would therefore be contrary to our values if we had to be bound by the law.’  That would be rightly regarded as absurd, since it would destroy the whole point of the legislation, and the rights of homosexuals which it was intended to protect would simply have been overridden.  Why then should the demands of the Catholic Church for exemption be regarded any differently, simply because they are based on religious convictions?  To do so would be to privilege a particular religion, and would be inconsistent with the argument from fairness.

The pragmatic argument might, however, provide grounds for qualifying that practical conclusion.  If part of the case for secularism is the need for people with differing beliefs and values to live side by side without destructive conflict, then, other things being equal, it is better not to force people to do things which offend against their deeply held convictions.  That does not mean that anyone has an automatic right to be exempt from legislation with which they do not agree.  Whether there should be a right of ‘conscientious objection’ should depend on the particular case, and the desirability of not requiring people to go against their own strong convictions may well be outweighed by other people’s rights and interests.  Compare these two cases.  We have said that Catholics and other religious believers, even if they strongly disapprove of homosexuality, should not be allowed to discriminate against homosexuals, and it was right that they were not allowed exemption from the recent legislation.  The 1967 Abortion Act, however, did include a ‘conscience clause’ stating that medical professionals with a conscientious objection to abortion should not be required to carry out such treatment.  What is the difference between the two cases?  If Catholics and other religious groups had been granted exemption from the Sexual Orientation Equality Act, this would have allowed them to violate the rights of homosexuals not to be discriminated against.[xi]  In contrast, the conscience clause in the Abortion Act does not restrict women’s right to have an abortion, provided they are referred, as they should be, to another doctor.  But again everything depends on the particular circumstances.  If a large proportion of doctors wished to be exempt from performing abortions, this might make it seriously difficult for women to obtain an abortion, and the case for ‘conscientious objection’ would be correspondingly weakened.

It also needs to be stressed that if there are sometimes grounds for allowing conscientious objection, it is not because *religious* views deserve special respect.  The case for not forcing people to act against their own deeply held convictions applies regardless of whether the basis of those convictions is religious or non-religious.  To require that conscientious objection should be on religious grounds would be to accord unfair privilege to the religious.

**Religious symbols**

Some similar issues are raised by another recurrent class of controversies.  Religious believers often want or need to give public expression to their distinctive faith allegiance.  They may want to do so through their code of dress or personal adornment – by wearing a cross, or a turban, a head-scarf or a hijab or burkha.  Should they have an unfettered right to this public display of their religion?  Similarly, some religions see it as vital that they should worship on a particular day of the week, a Friday or a Saturday or a Sunday, and this may conflict with secular work schedules.  The same problem may arise with the observance of important religious festivals at particular times of the year.  Traditionally there are public holidays to coincide with the major Christian festivals of Christmas and Easter.  If Christianity can shape public life in this way, why can’t Eid or Ramadan, Diwali or Hanukkah?

Secularism need not rule out the freedom of religious believers to express their religion through their choice of clothing or jewellery, including in public buildings and institutions.  We would not for instance advocate regulations like that in France, banning the wearing of the head-scarf by Muslim girls in state schools, which we think would be unnecessarily restrictive in the cultural context of the UK.  Both the argument from autonomy and the argument from fairness would support the right of individuals to choose how to dress in public, provided their choices do not harm anyone else, and would welcome the consequent diversity.  The pragmatic argument could point in the same direction – if religious believers are deeply attached to a particular dress code, then, other things being equal, it is better to accommodate them rather than inflame religious antipathies.

All three arguments would also support arrangements to enable religious believers to worship on the appropriate days and times wherever possible.  Likewise the argument from fairness would support the case for the major festivals of non-Christian religions to be given the same recognition as the Christian festivals – and we doubt whether atheists would object to additional public holidays!  To suggest that distinctively religious dress should be banned from public institutions just because it is religious, or that religious holidays should have no recognition in public life, would be to insist on a rigid divide between the public and the private, of a kind which we have agreed to be untenable.

The case is different if the wearing of certain kinds of clothing or jewellery needs to be prohibited for good reasons having nothing to do with religion.  Suppose for instance that in some jobs there are sensible ‘health and safety’ reasons why all employees should be prevented from wearing jewellery.  And suppose then that a particular employee wants to wear jewellery in the form of a crucifix on a necklace, because this would be a profession of her Christian faith.  If there are good reasons in the first place for prohibiting all jewellery, then there is no good reason for making an exception simply because a certain item of jewellery has a religious significance.  To do so would, again, be to give religion a privileged status.[xii]

**Education**

We have referred to the example of dress code in schools, and the sphere of education is one in which questions about secularism are especially likely to arise and to be contentious.  Educational institutions clearly play a central role in establishing the character of a society, but they are also institutions in which competing values are especially likely to come into conflict and where neutrality is difficult.

For example, religious education in most schools in the public system now takes the form not of religious instruction intended to inculcate a particular faith, but of open and broad exposure to the different religious traditions, and increasingly to secular traditions too, helping pupils to assess and decide on their own beliefs.  Some religious believers, including parents, object to this; they want their own religion to be presented to their children not as one option among others but as the true system of belief, a living faith taught by those who are committed to it and understand it from within.  Conversely, personal autonomy is widely seen as a central value in education; children should be encouraged to develop independence and to think for themselves.  The value of autonomy may however be anathema to religious believers who advocate humble submission to the will of God as revealed through his priests or religious teachers.  How can a public system of education be neutral between these competing values?

We have suggested above that the value of autonomy may have some purchase with religious believers outside the ranks of thorough-going liberals.  Most religious believers, we would have thought, would value religious affiliation as something which ought to be a genuine commitment on the part of the individual, something which he or she has chosen with a full understanding of that and other faiths and beliefs, not something which has been inculcated as the only available option.  The value of autonomy ought therefore to be something which can be widely accepted as appropriate at least in the sphere of education.  Even those whose religion would support a rigid moral code could accept that their children should be enabled to make their own choice about whether to embrace that religion and that moral code in the first place.

We know, however, that not everyone accepts it.  Some Muslims, and some Christians, say quite openly that what they want is for their children to be indoctrinated in the faith.[xiii]  What should our response be?

This is where we encounter the vexed question of *faith schools*.  It is also where the argument from autonomy and the argument from fairness could, in principle, have differing implications.  Clearly neither argument is consistent with the traditional idea (enshrined in the 1944 Education Act) that in a Christian country the public system of education should bring up children to be good Christians, with compulsory Christian assemblies and compulsory Christian religious instruction.  The argument from fairness could, however, be seen as requiring that every faith should have its own quota of faith schools within the public sector.  If there are to be Christian faith schools and non-religious schools, then, it could be argued, there should also be Muslim schools and Jewish schools and Hindu schools which are all supported by public funding.  That would be one version of secularism, insofar as it would give no one faith or system of belief a privileged position.  And that is, of course, the way in which government policy has in fact gone in recent years.

The different arguments for secularism could therefore lead to different conclusions about faith schools.  The argument from fairness could in principle be used to support the view that every faith should be entitled to its own schools, whereas the argument from autonomy could support the view that there should be no faith schools at all in the public system. We believe that the value of autonomy is in fact central to the case against faith schools.  Admittedly, in some faith schools religious education is of a high quality, eschewing indoctrination and cultivating pupils’ autonomy.  Even if that is so, however, there is always liable to be a tension between the school’s respect for autonomy and its ‘faith’ character, which is typically seen to involve encouraging and promoting a certain ‘ethos’.  If churches and faiths want to contribute to education for its own sake, there is nothing to stop them doing so, by making financial donations or by encouraging their members to volunteer to help in schools or to train as teachers.  But if they insist on having their own schools, it is difficult to see why they should want this unless with the hope that Christian or Muslim schools will encourage pupils to grow up as Christians or Muslims.[xiv]

The argument from fairness might to some extent support the case for every faith to have its own quota of faith schools in the public system, in proportion to its strength in the society at large.  There is more to be said, however.  There are, first, simple considerations of practicality.  If all parents were to have the option of sending their children to a faith school of their own religion in their own locality, there would have to be an unrealistically vast increase in the number of schools.  Note also that if churches and other faith groups are actively encouraged to set up their own schools and given support from public funding, then even if this is done with fairness as between the different religions, it gives religious organisations a privileged position within the educational system, by comparison with the non-religious.  In that respect it is incompatible with fairness-based secularism

Our third argument, the pragmatic case for secularism, can also come into play at this point.  There are serious concerns about the social effects of faith schools.  The pragmatic argument was that in a pluralist society people of all faiths and none have to learn to live together without their differences degenerating into destructive conflict.  We believe that faith schools tend to obstruct that goal.  They are liable to be divisive, they encourage children to identify with their own separate communities, and are thus liable to perpetuate a climate of suspicion and distrust.

**Conclusion**

We have reviewed the different arguments for secularism. We have reviewed the different things that secularism might mean in practice.  We have suggested that there is no single knock-down argument for secularism.  Different arguments depend on different premises, some of which will be more widely accepted than others.  We have also suggested that what secularism requires in practice will be open to debate, reflecting both the differing emphases of the core arguments and differing assessments of practical consequences.  Nevertheless the broad thrust of our discussion is clear.  We believe that the case for secularism is sound, that it can be defended with arguments which are not distinctively humanist but are acceptable to the great majority of religious believers, and that its practical application will make for a healthier and more harmonious society.[xv]

[i] Bishop Michael Nazir Ali, interviewed on the Today programme on Radio 4 on 6 November 2006.

[ii] Locke thought that such toleration should not be extended to atheists, because ‘promises, covenants and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist’.  In saying this, he was failing to apply his own argument consistently.  If belief in the Anglican creed rather than Catholicism, or in Christianity rather than Islam, cannot be coerced, then belief in religion rather than atheism cannot be coerced either.  And if atheists cannot be trusted, they do not become any more trustworthy by being compelled to profess a faith which they do not genuinely accept.  See John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689).

[iii]  The most well-known defence of liberal values by appeal to facts about human nature is in John Stuart Mill’s essay *On Liberty* (1859).  Mill says, in chapter III of that work: ‘Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing.’  Facts about human nature are not, however, the only possible basis for liberal values.  Other kinds of justification may be invoked, and this is not the place to adjudicate between them.

[iv] 16% in the 2001 census, 63% in an ICM poll in December 2006.

[v]  The philosopher who has given the idea of the ‘veil of ignorance’ its prominent position in modern versions of social contract theory is John Rawls in his *A Theory of Justice* (New York and Oxford, 1971).

[vi]  Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651).  The famous description of the state of nature as ‘a war… of every man against every man’ comes in Part I, chapter 13, ‘Of the Natural Condition of Mankind’.  Hobbes adds that ‘war consists not in battle only, or the act of fighting, but in a tract of time wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known’.  So a situation of conflict which is constantly in danger of erupting into violence would count as a state of war.

[vii]  The proviso about ‘harm to others’ is important.  Practices such as forced marriages, or female genital mutilation, or ‘honour killings’ of family members held guilty of some sexual transgression, will not be permitted by a secular state, even if they are held to be endorsed by a religious tradition.  In prohibiting them, the secular state is not exhibiting a prejudice against a religion, it is impartially protecting the rights of its citizens.

[viii] In their foreword to Nick Spencer, *Doing God: A Future for Faith in the Public Square* (Theos, London, 2006)

[ix] Rowan Williams, ‘Secularism, Faith and Freedom’, a lecture given at the pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Rome, 23rd November 2006. (<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons_speeches/061123a.htm>)

[x] For more on the issue of Bishops in the House of Lords, see ‘BHA Briefing 2006/3: Lords Reform’, which can be found in the ‘Campaigns’ section of the BHA web site [www.humanism.org.uk](http://www.humanism.org.uk/)

[xi]  The law does in fact allow some exemptions.  It permits organisations which exist to practise, advance or teach religion or belief to restrict participation in their own internal activities on grounds of sexual orientation.  (So churches are not forced by law to have gay priests, for instance.)  But the regulations prohibit discrimination in the provision of goods and services to the public, and do not allow exemption from this on grounds of ‘conscience’.

[xii] A recent case which raised these issues was that of the UK teenager whose insistence whose insistence on wearing a silver ring signifying her intention to remain a virgin until married brought her into conflict with her school’s regulations about uniform.  See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6900512.stm

[xiii] A classic example was a statement by the head of the (private) Nottingham Islamia School, Ibrahim Lawson, in an interview with Ernie Rea on ‘Beyond Belief’ (Radio 4, 10 March 2003):

ER:  Ibrahim Lawson, how would you define the purpose of your Islamia school?

IL:  Well, the essential purpose of the Islamia school as with all Islamic schools is to inculcate profound religious belief in the children.

ER:  You use the word ‘inculcate’: does that mean you are in the business of indoctrination?

IL:  I would say so, yes; I mean we are quite unashamed about that really.  The reason that parents send their children to our school is that they want them to grow up to be very good Muslims.

ER:  Does that mean that Islam is a given and is never challenged?

IL:  That’s right…

                    From a Christian perspective Terence Copley, in his *Indoctrination, Education and God: The Struggle for the Mind* (London, 2005), accuses secularism of being itself a form of indoctrination insofar as it treats religious belief as merely an optional personal allegiance.  He urges a more confessional approach to religious education, aiming to ‘nurture children in the heritage religion of their culture’ while ‘allowing them the freedom to discuss and question’ (p.113).

[xiv] See our Humanist Philosophers’ Group pamphlet *Religious Schools: the Case Against*, published by the British Humanist Association (London, 2001).

[xv] For more on the practical applications of secularism, see Andrew Copson and David Pollock, ‘Religion and the state in an open society’ on www.humanism.org.uk