

Introduction: the secularist challenge

Many secularists view religion with suspicion, if not open hostility. Religious people, they claim, make dogmatic judgments about unresolvable issues. For Jews, it seems God presented the fullness of his truth in the Torah and, though interpretation is endless, further revelations are not needed; for Christians, Jesus is the only way to salvation, and those who do not accept this are doomed to an eternity in hell; for Muslims, there is one God, Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet. Each claim is asserted as the truth, thereby implying that everyone else is in error. These different truth-claims come packaged with different ethical codes. For some monogamy is required, for others polygamy is permitted. For some homosexuality can be tolerated, for others it is to be condemned. This diversity, explains the secularist, suggests that religious outlooks are difficult to accommodate in public affairs. Everything in the religious disposition seems to justify intolerance.

Much of religious history illustrates the point. The world of medieval Christendom conjures up images of the Inquisition and religious wars. For a society to succeed, argues the secularist, we need to reduce religion to the sphere of the personal and private. Religious people can demand of themselves a high personal morality, but should not impose it on anyone else. They should be allowed to believe whatever they like in the privacy of their own home, and to propagate their views, but they should not seek to impose their beliefs on those who do not share them: their ideas have no special privilege.

This secularist outlook has exercised a considerable hold over

public polity in western Europe and North America. In Britain, for example, church attendance has fallen dramatically, and so has religious passion.¹ For the secularist, this is to be welcomed. Modern Britain compares very favourably with other countries in the world, such as Iran, which, the secularists argue, is still trapped in the old world of religious fanaticism and intolerance. From this perspective, a range of positions within the public square requires a secular society. The choice for the secularist is simple: either an intolerant society with religion in the saddle or a tolerant secular society with religion taking its place alongside other opinions and life styles.

The traditional Christian response to this argument has often been to refuse to make concessions. Christians have complained that the religious vacuum suggested by the secularist is nothing more than a quasi-religious or ideological claim which is imposed on everyone else – a religion of ‘humanism’ which denies any transcendent truth-claims. In the name of tolerance, it is claimed, secularists impose their atheism. Further, secular culture is deeply destructive. It is a culture in rebellion against God, and therefore subject to all the frustrations of sin.

Now there is some sense in this response, and in the second part we shall examine it in detail. But it ignores the force of the secularist challenge in one very important respect. It seems to imply a power struggle. The Christian complains of the secularist’s intolerance of religion while, it often appears, wanting religion to be returned to power so religion itself can once again be intolerant. Every society must have some sort of ‘idea’, the argument goes; better that it be Christian than secular. It is a power struggle with an intolerant Christianity wanting to displace the intolerant secularism. Any real engagement with plurality has been side-stepped. Both sides seem to find it difficult to accept legitimate difference.

One of the greatest problems facing western culture in the late twentieth century is the problem of truth and tolerance in the public square. Religious traditions are right to complain that a secular society creates a dangerous vacuum of value at the heart of any culture. Secularists can legitimately expect certain

standards of civility to be observed by contributors to the public discussion, which must include a willingness to tolerate certain fundamental disagreements.

This book is an attempt to consider the theological and philosophical problems posed by the secularist challenge. We shall start with the traditional Christian response to the secularist, taking the Christendom Group in Britain as a fairly recent representative. I shall show that, although there is much of value in their analysis, the problem of tolerance and plurality remains. Furthermore the failure even to concede tolerance as an achievement of modernity is an important aspect of their total rejection of the culture of modernity. This total opposition partly explains why their proposals were so unrealistic.

The spirit of the Christendom group continues to imbue the British approach to plurality. The crisis over immigration provoked by the speeches of Enoch Powell and, more recently, the Salman Rushdie affair presupposed the ideal of a unitary culture – a culture where one religious option dominates.

The approach of the Christendom group is contrasted with the outlook found in the United States. Here we find a culture preoccupied with the problem of religion and tolerance. A sustained discussion of the history and civil religion of America reveals a different cultural option emerging. The apparent impasse between the secularist and theist is being broken. It is possible for a religiously informed culture to be tolerant.

Building on this discovery, the theologian can go on the attack. The secularist argument is bankrupt at every level. Its strongest element was the need for tolerance as an important ingredient in civility.² But now the tables can be turned. A case can be made that the best way to protect the standards of civility in the public square is not to marginalize religion, but to bring it firmly into the square. It will be shown that the greater threat to tolerance and plurality comes not from the competing religious outlooks, but from secularism. However, this argument comes at a certain price. I shall show that tolerance and

plurality do depend on a certain theological shift from a traditional to a more liberal stance – at least in certain respects. This is, of course, widely assumed. The extent of the required shifts has often been overstated, and throughout arguments are offered which show how as-conservative-as-possible forms of belief can nevertheless be tolerant.

The basic argument is an exercise in Christian ethics. However, it is a ‘Christian ethics’ of a certain type. The main issue here is the relation between culture and religion. It requires discussion of matters historical, philosophical, sociological, and theological. It explores the ethical questions from a cultural perspective. In this respect the *approach* of the book is heavily influenced by the work of Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr. The Niebuhrs discerned the appropriate ground on which ethical questions must be tackled. Most Christian ethics tends to work far too crudely. Church reports on social questions tend to start from certain theological principles and then leap to certain social implications, creating the absurd impression that the policy prescriptions arrived at are God’s timeless requirements for all humanity. So, for example, from the theologico-ethical principles of ‘freedom and learning’ we get a commitment to vouchers for American schools. Clearly, this cannot be a timeless requirement for all people everywhere. Although others have already made this point, it is worthy of repetition. So in Part I I have described the appropriate method for such questions as theology and plurality, which I believe is making explicit the method found in the Niebuhrs.

The book divides into four Parts. In Part I (chs. 1 and 2), I shall locate both the problem and the method. The problem of tolerance is described in terms of plurality and secularism; I locate the foundations that underpin the secularist approach to plurality. In regard to the method, I suggest that Christian ethicists need to work with three modes of enquiry – the theological, the cultural, and the practical. In Part II (chs. 3, 4, and 5), I examine the ‘traditional European’ response. For many Christians, this is the rejection of modernity, and the call for the establishment of a Christian society. Others are happy to accommodate modernity, but still feel that too much re-

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ligious and cultural diversity is threatening. And those who want to resist these calls for a unitary culture and endorse plurality often feel forced to give uncritical support to secularism. The idea of a religious commitment to diversity has not been discovered.

In Part III (chs. 6 and 7), I examine the background to the American experience and discovery. I discuss the insights emerging from the Civil Religion debate and the attempt, in the work of Richard John Neuhaus, to form a public philosophy. The final part is the longest and most innovative. In this I try to construct the theoretical argument against secularism, and show that rational discourse, genuine tolerance, and public polity need the presence of religious outlooks. This is an attempt to show, with the help of philosophical argument, the inadequacy of secularism.

Two qualifiers need to be added. The first is that many ethicists shy away from questions of such complexity. It is difficult to master all the relevant historical, philosophical, and theological material. Yet this practical difficulty can all too easily become the excuse for refusing to tackle these large interdisciplinary questions. I ask my readers to tolerate the brevity of much of my discussion, and trust the discussion is sufficient to establish my overall thesis. Secondly, many theologians and ethicists object to the term tolerance. They do so for good reasons. 'Tolerance' seems to suggest isolated individuals keeping their distance from each other. As will emerge in Part IV, tolerance is only the bare minimum in our relations with others, and for religious reasons it needs to develop into a richer exchange and mutual dialogue. However, I have retained the term because it is the starting-point. Historically, so many religious dispositions seem to compel the church toward intolerance. Even tolerant co-existence is preferable to intolerance.

It will be shown that the American discovery is that religious dispositions need not imply intolerance. The theologian must try to explicate the theological implications of this. In doing so I shall show that certain forms of secularism are built on the shaky foundations of relativism and subjectivism, which can

and must be opposed by the religious commitment to truth. Secularism is no longer a secure foundation for plurality. Religious traditions need to welcome plurality as a part of God's world. This implies that disagreement, argument, and difference are all to be seen as within the providence of God. Seen in this light, religious institutions can offer the public square a moral perspective grounded in a commitment to plurality.

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PART I

CHAPTER I

Plurality and secularism

For secularists, despite their lack of religious commitment, religious plurality creates social and political difficulties. It also raises theoretical problems relating to tolerance and its practical outworking in society. In this chapter I shall explore the narrative underpinning this view of plurality. First, however, I need to clarify the meanings of ‘plurality’ and ‘tolerance’.

PLURALITY

Throughout this discussion I shall use the word ‘plurality’ rather than ‘pluralism’. Plurality signifies the simple phenomenological reality of differing and conflicting traditions (or world views) arising in different communities with different histories. For my purposes it is important to stress that these differing traditions are not simply differing propositional beliefs about the world. A small vulnerable Asian Muslim community in the UK does not simply disagree with Christians over the status of Jesus. This belief fits into a total outlook and culture, with a distinctive language and history different from those of the majority Christian population (even though its Christian belief is now nominal). The problem of plurality involves the problem of different communities, with different identities, coexisting, and so raises questions of tolerance.

The term ‘plurality’ simply describes a state of affairs that is seen increasingly in our cities; it implies no judgment on its desirability or otherwise. The term ‘pluralism’, on the other hand, has come to describe a theological position. For John Hick, ‘pluralism’ points to a transformed outlook to different

religions: no longer are we able to speak of one tradition as being true and those that disagree as false, instead we must talk of different and equally valid ways to the Real.¹ For Hick, pluralism is set against exclusivism or inclusivism.² This is a separate debate. Although the theme of this book will lead me to comment on that debate in chapter ten, I have tried to distance my argument as far as possible from the Christian theology of other religions.

Plurality is no great challenge to Hick-type pluralists. They have a theoretical structure in which religious disagreements are only apparent. Hick no longer believes that the beliefs of the religions 'really' conflict with each other. For Hick, Christians and Muslims only appear to disagree. This apparent disagreement is due to different cultural responses to the one true reality underpinning all major religious traditions. Coexistence is therefore easy because all disagreements become irrelevant. However, for those who believe that their religion is true, this is not an option. It is important to remember that most orthodox adherents in most religious traditions believe that their tradition is the truth, or at least more true than the alternatives. Plurality is therefore a challenge.

So from the fact of plurality we derive the need for 'tolerance'. Tolerance among committed believers of different traditions is an obvious need if social harmony is to prevail. It is precisely because of this that the secularist, with a position of neutrality, appears to be on such strong ground. Religious people are often tempted to express their commitment by excluding those who disagree; it is for this reason that the secularist suggests that religion must be kept out of the public square.

TOLERANCE

Tolerance is itself contentious. Tolerance has personal, group, and political dimensions. On the personal level, a landlady might exercise tolerance when renting her flat to a gay couple or an unmarried couple living together. On the group level, a predominantly Christian community in a city would exercise tolerance toward the Muslim minority, if they permitted a

disused Methodist Church to be converted into a Mosque. And on the political level, a state exercises a policy of toleration when it makes legal provision requiring all to respect the festivals of minority religions. All three dimensions are linked. All require the willingness to accept differences (whether religious, moral, ethnic, or economic), of which, at whatever level, one might disapprove.³

For a person or group to be tolerant, two conditions must be met. First, that person or group must be in a position of power to allow or forbid the action or situation in question. Dilemmas involving the exercise of tolerance arise when the party in question has some degree of power. The landlady is in that position in respect to the couple seeking to rent from her. If the landlady decides to exercise her power by refusing to rent (or forcing them to move out), then she would be intolerant (i.e. because she disapproved of homosexuality or unmarried cohabitation she found it impossible to tolerate such situations in her flat). This power can be either explicit or implicit. In our example the landlady has explicit power (i.e. she is in a position to decide who may be her tenants). When the white majority in the community make life unpleasant for their recently arrived black neighbour, they are exercising implicit power (i.e. diffused power located in a community outlook). Many of the worst examples of intolerance are the result of implicit rather than explicit power.

The second condition is that one must disapprove, even if only minimally or potentially. The sense of disapproval or even antagonism is important. One does not tolerate that which is accepted or an object of love. If one is an ardent supporter of homosexual rights, then one is not being tolerant in letting one's flat to a gay couple. I do not tolerate my wife; I love her. No disapproval is involved; I am proud and fond of her. Nor does one tolerate that towards which one is indifferent. If you do not care about homosexuality, then you are not tolerating it. You are simply indifferent; it stands alongside other equally irrelevant issues such as the existence of the Loch Ness monster.

The equation between indifference and tolerance is the mistake made by Wolff, Marcuse, and Moore in *A Critique of*