

Religious Reasons and Public Reason: Recalibrating Ireland's Benevolent Secularism

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Abstract

Liberal regimes in the West are not homogeneous in their application of secular principles. What kind of “secular” state a particular government promotes depends in large part on the strength and influence of the majority religion in that region. This article acknowledges the heuristic value of a recent threefold taxonomy of secularism: passive, assertive, and benevolent forms of secularism. I take issue with and challenge certain institutional privileges granted to the majority religion in one benevolently secular regime, the Republic of Ireland. I consider how benevolent secularism, while remaining benevolent toward religion, can align its application of secularism in the arena of publicly-funded education (primary and secondary education). A politically liberal regime, defined by the idea of public reason, invokes the principle of publicity, namely, that discourse and public policy be intelligible (and acceptable to a large degree) not only to an individual's religious or moral community but also to the broader collection of members who constitute a liberal state. Drawing on John Rawls' conception of public reason, and using Ireland as a case study, I show how this particular state-religion interrelation can be recalibrated in order to increase the prospects of reconciliation with a secular space of public reason.

Keywords: political liberalism, Rawls, secularism, public reason, Good Samaritan

Liberalism as a political doctrine supposes that there are many conflicting and incommensurable conceptions of the good, each compatible with the full rationality of human persons, so far as we can ascertain within a workable political conception of justice (Rawls, 1985: 248).

1. Introduction: Religion, Public Reason, Secularism

Public reason, should it remain truly public, conforms to the logic of diversity, namely, that reasons should assume a form of discourse acceptable to many kinds of worldviews, those typically found in the context of a religiously and morally diverse citizenry. Indeed, the ideal of public reason would follow strictly from a synoptic definition of “publicity” or publicness: that discourse be intelligible not only to an individual's religious or moral community but also to the broader collection of members who constitute a liberal state. A moral worldview, religious or non-religious, may be introduced anytime into the arena of political debate. However, the citizen's commitment to liberal democracy requires that religious reason, as a form of speech, be verbalized in a manner that resonates with any other citizen (who is also committed to public reason). Public reasons (religious or not), on this view, by definition are not confined to the narrow logic of their religious or theological doctrines. They must also appeal to, and be formulated in, a vocabulary that all reasonable citizens could grasp (even if they ultimately reject it) in a democratic society. How restrictive and thus rebarbative is this view of public reason for citizens who adopt and live by religious forms of reason? Are religious reasons and public reason incompatible?

Liberal democracies are secular regimes in the sense of “public” described above. Their constitutions, courts and government officials aim to ensure that religious, political and civil liberties are protected, to such an extent that liberty of conscience establishes in principle that we accept the rights and liberties of all religious and non-religious moral worldviews. This explicitly denies hegemony to any one group. Political liberalism's secularism, say as John Rawls conceives of it, is secular according to this particular definition of “publicness.” By way of introduction, we can draft a sketch-like diagnosis of the type of secularism to which Rawlsian secularism belongs, attentive as it is to diversity, pluralism, and irreconcilable differences.

Rawls, the most significant proponent of political liberalism in the second half of the twentieth-century, invites citizens to employ their religious vocabularies (if they have one) in a sensible, open-ended, and imaginative way. Political liberalism's secularism may elude simple sociological taxonomies, but we may at a minimum acknowledge with little

effort that it does not involve an established or privileged religious tradition. Hence the fundamental convictions and interests of one religious group, often distinct from and perhaps opposed to the interests of other groups, does not need to compete for the democratic regime's constitutional support.

For "To retain such hopes and aims would be inconsistent with the idea of equal basic liberties for all free and equal citizens" (Rawls, 1999: 150). Some secular states, surprisingly to readers sympathetic to Rawls (like myself), often do involve legal privileges (combined with unspoken concessions) be granted to the traditional majority religion. This appears to be the case in many European states with long-standing confessional legacies, such as a Lutheran Germany, an Anglican England, a Presbyterian Scotland, or a Roman Catholic Ireland.¹ Are these liberal polities "inconsistent" with the idea and practice of equal basic liberties for all free and equal citizens?

A liberal polity, framed according to the rationality of secular reason and the prospects of policy debate it affords, shall make every effort to refrain from theological justification of its policies and legal structures. Simultaneous to, and underpinning the movement of the secular, is the concern with individual liberty, and of which the exemplar for our purpose is freedom of religion: the protection of the liberty of each citizen to adopt any one religious or spiritual doctrine and to use it in any given context. Public reason therefore does not exclude religious/moral discourse, but it does ask that discussants attempt to voice religious reason's perspective in relationship with, and with sensitivity to, those who do not share its basic assumptions, values, and beliefs, sacred texts, and so forth. Public reason does not control or restrict religious reason, but it does require that the religious voice reconcile with and be attentive to pluralism.

It is for this reason that Rawls asks us to conceive of public reason as a "wide" framework of give-and-take between citizens. This, no doubt, is a principle reason why Richard Rorty (2007) would unhesitatingly classify Rawls's overall concern as pragmatist rather than metaphysical.² The chief principle of pragmatism is non-sectarian dialogue. The public interaction between citizens governed by the safeguards of a liberal polity is faithful to the logic of maximum civic liberty, enacted quite apart from the question of moral or religious consensus. To be sure, civic liberty cherishes religious and moral rationality, inasmuch as each citizen remains free to adopt whatever religious or moral vocabulary she prefers. Liberalism does not require consensus on questions of morality and religion, even while it may cultivate shared civic affections and bonds of decency and justice. It may well even ask its citizens to remain vigilant of negative public emotions like tribalism, racism, disgust of others who are different (simply because they are different), etc.³

As long a liberal democracy encourages public dialogue to be carried out in the reflective idiom of public reason, it does so in the spirit of explicit recognition that dialogue is a dialogue among real embodied citizens whose formation in a local community of practice (say a parish) is ineluctably affirmed. Each of us possesses real concerns, often discussed in rich religious and moral vocabularies, inculcated in us after years of membership in a particular community like a parish or temple; we are fundamentally motivated by narratives of love which are accompanied by and nourished in deep moral imaginaries, religious and non-religious alike.

It follows, plausibly, from this concrete context that the language (whatever its theological idiom) mobilized and employed in the economy of public reason should neither license nor entertain grammatical absolutism, a style of articulation that is understood only in the narrow religious terms and sources of authority in which the grammar is made meaningful and ultimately intelligible. For example, a Roman Catholic vocabulary or meaning-scheme, cannot dominate public discourse in the Republic of Ireland, should the Republic retain the status of a liberal state (however benevolent it should like to be in relation to its majority religion). That mode of public discourse is simply too narrow (not narrow-minded). More on Ireland and its troubled brand of "benevolent" secularism below.

¹ For more on European confessionalism in relation to the secular, see Jose Casanova (2018). Casanova observes, Europe after the Reformation "created new types of religiously homogeneous societies throughout continental Europe, a homogeneously Protestant North, a homogeneously Catholic South and three bi-confessional societies in between, Holland, Germany and Switzerland, each characterized by their own patterns of internal territorial confessionalization, based on confessional 'pillars', *Landeskirchen* or cantons" (2018, 190).

² I would concur with Rorty because of statements Rawls makes in the following, which I interpret as Rawls subscribing to non-metaphysical pragmatism: "As comprehensive moral ideals, autonomy and individuality are unsuited for a political conception of justice. As found in Kant and J. S. Mill, these comprehensive ideals, despite their very great importance in liberal thought, are extended too far when presented as the only appropriate foundation for a constitutional regime. So understood, liberalism becomes but another sectarian doctrine" (Rawls, 1985, 245-46). Also see my interpretation of Rawls' "political constructivism" as a political style of pragmatism, in Rivera (2018: chapter 4).

³ For more on the need for the state to enact legislation that deters negative emotions, see Nussbaum (2013).

The hermeneutic-of-wideness, in contrast, invokes the ideal of public justification: however valid “our” religious reasoning appears to be “us,” it must also proceed from “premises we accept and think others could reasonably accept to conclusion we think they could also reasonably accept” (Rawls, 1999: 155). This properly public exchange of reasons, while complex and untidy, treads interminably on the difficult knife-edge between narrow individualism and the naïve aspiration for universal logic. The delicate balance here belongs to the dialectical performance opened up between both, so that particular faith traditions maintain at once their own integrity as this unique theological language and their capacity to expand their grammatical apparatus by supplementing it with a “wider” use of public concepts, reasons, examples, all in the attempt to cultivate civic ties of communication, perhaps even political friendship and social bonds of affection with others. This exchange, wide as it is, need not involve translation of a thick religious vocabulary into a thinned-out, neutral rational language. I do not invoke the Enlightenment myth of universal reason, as if a theological worldview could be absolved of its perspective.⁴ Rather, relationality and dialogue are “collaborative efforts and must be undertaken in contexts of equality with attitudes of mutual humility and learning,” which necessarily invites each citizen to expand and enlarge, not curtail or disqualify, her native vocabulary.⁵

Secular regimes can encourage the implementation of this kind of “wide” configuration of dialogue and collaborative civic performance. How and in what context can we consider this method or practice of dialogue? The Republic of Ireland represents a “benevolent” form of secularism, which favours and grants privileges to its Roman Catholic heritage. To challenge the cosy interlacing of the church and state in the final remarks is to implicate us in a larger debate about the very nature and scope of a “secularism” as such, in its expression in liberal democracies, much of which we can only recapitulate in brief.

I chart, in what follows, two types of secularism endorsed by Charles Taylor, and more recently, the threefold typology of secularism that includes passive, assertive, and benevolent formations of secularism. This typology is relevant to the diffuse European scene in which at least three types are present. I take Ireland as an exemplar here of benevolent secularism, not so that it may be overcome, but so that it may make manifest what is truly public about public reason, and what is not. Public reason is secular, and it may put its legal discourse at odds with moral precepts of religious, “comprehensive” doctrines. But public reason, as I hope to make clear, is neither exclusive of religion nor contained within its own inescapable ideological circularity.

2. Secularization Theory: A Plea for Polysemy

Recent statistical and sociological analyses of the global phenomenon of secularization have borne out the reality that secularization has in fact taken place across many cultures and geographical territories. The so-called theory of de-secularization, one author finds, never happened as such; the so-called re-sacralization of a state or government has been so marginal as to be rendered inconsequential (Brown, 2019). Even Peter Berger, a chief proponent (in 1990s) of de-secularization as a form of “walking back” the excessive claims and hubris of the secularization theory, has indicated in more recent writings that he has stepped back too far (Berger, 2014). Widespread secularization has occurred, and it has opened up western society to the phenomenon of pluralism. Sacralized governments are thus the exception, not the rule.

Further, as more recent statistics show in the United States and in Ireland (to take just two examples),⁶ the rise of the “religious none” (Mercadante, 2014) continues to dominate the religious landscape. Also nonpreferred religions, “along with atheism, have made measurable gains toward equality with majority ‘preferred religions, but short of complete equality” (Brown, 2019: 571). Hence the long-term effect of secularization at both the level of policy and political polity, appears to be confirmable at an empirical level (causation of secularization is another topic altogether).

The secularization theory does not hold that statistics disclose the types of secular government we find in Europe, North America, India, and beyond. Certainly, many citizens in many countries across the globe maintain a high level of religiosity. Not only is institutional religion visible, the surging spiritual-but-not-religious mindset often enacts a supernatural worldview. Bruce Robbins illustrates this phenomenon by adducing recent explanations put forward by ordinary citizens in America as evidence of pluralism, not post-secularism. The idea that citizens and communities of

⁴ Habermas appears to think this idea of translation to be possible. See, for example, Habermas (2006: 11). For a sympathetic reading of Habermas, which does not reduce his work to a misbegotten “translation” theory, see Craig Calhoun (2011).

⁵ I am influenced here by Erin Wilson’s excellent article (2017).

⁶ For recent Irish statistics, see (<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8rrc/>). For the American statistical landscape, see <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/5-key-findings-u-s-religious-landscape/>.

cultural groups used to be religious, then became secular, and then over time, became religious again (i.e. post-secular), is simply implausible from the point of view of statistics, cultural analysis, and sociology. Robbins highlights how easily the American citizen has recourse to divine intervention as a “reason” for why good or awful things happen. We have never been truly secular at the individual level of personal piety, worldview, and interpersonal dynamics (Robbins, 2013).

Challenges to its credibility notwithstanding, post-secular means, for Jürgen Habermas (who made the term famous) in the early 2000s, that the western world, after immigration and the visibility of Islam, has grown unambiguously pluralistic. It once was secular but is now obviously post-secular in the precise sense that religious voices are audible, and in a very public way (Habermas, 2006: 1-5).

However, the post-secular can also mean post-religious. And this second meaning, for myself, is the most interesting and compelling of the two, because I think this reflects a properly statistical reality. Post-secular may also mean that a community or a country has become so secular that it no longer pits secular against sacred, or church against state. To say a political climate reflects a secular ideology is to presuppose a relationship with the sacred. Secular is parasitic on the sacred. Or one could say the sacred is parasitic on the secular. As worldviews, they are mutually reinforcing in secular cultures. In contrast, post-secular may mean that the sacred and the secular have lost their status as flashpoints or as salient markers of personal identity, at least for the overwhelming majority of the citizenry. To be religious in a post-secular context is no longer important enough to warrant a comment; to be a Christian or a Jew in a post-secular country is like saying one is a soccer fan or a basketball fan or that one enjoys opera. Religious identity has declined to the degree it has become just one more innocuous personality trait among others. Hence a post-secular state neither tolerates religion nor remains neutral in the face of many religious traditions on offer—rather the post-secular condition assumed by the state is state *indifferent* to all things religious.

Moreover, post-secular states differ from secular states, in that the former cease to define themselves as neutral vis-à-vis religion or non-religion. Post-secular states do not take a stance toward the religion or non-religion of their citizens or the religious or anti-religious organizations in society, but they also refrain from professing to be neutral and from explicitly not taking a stance with respect to religious matters. The public exercise of managing, nurturing or even relating to questions of religion has become irrelevant to the state’s self-understanding. The state has become indifferent to religion in that it no longer privileges religion as a principal component of society. To me, this is the natural end toward which secularization thesis leads and it may become a context in which religious ones would thrive. Countries that may represent this post-secular and post-Christian climate are the Czech Republic and Slovenia (Dalferth, 2010), and as Phil Zuckerman increasingly demonstrates, in large swaths of the United States and Western Europe (2012; 2015).

There likely is no single, all-encompassing “secularization theory,” but rather a multivalent and differentiated expression of the secular state. That is, there is no “electric toothbrush theory” of modernization, as Peter Berger memorably depicts it. One could not draw a linear line from late-modern technology and free markets to western secular civilization, a site where there is an impermeable border between church and state. Should we drop an electric toothbrush into the Amazonian rainforest, we should not assume that in one generation it would resemble Cleveland (Berger’s choice of a rustbelt city) (Berger, 2014: 68). Technology can disenchant a culture, but the process by which it occurs differs according to language, colonial heritage, religion, geography. Hence there may be many altars of modernity, even beyond the usual Protestant versus Catholic versions of European modernization outlined by someone as distinguished as David Martin (2005).

Charles Taylor suggests that at work in many liberal democracies are two types of secularism, visible at the state level. The first tends to “control” religion. Here the narrative emerges with consistency: the state excludes religious symbols from public schools (France) or it intervenes bioethics when religious views of the person preclude life-saving care (Canada). This kind of secularism may well be fixated on or focused on religion, to the point of singling it out among other kinds of important moral life plans (that are not religious) so that it may regulate what is perceived to be religion’s impulse to frame society according to its theology. The state may challenge religion, chastening it to the point of territorial control, whereby it submits religious reason to scrutiny and ultimately surveillance.⁷

The second model of state-religion interaction, in Taylor’s view, is the “diversity model,” a deflationary strategy he prefers more states would adopt in our pluralist age. That is, this approach deflates the emphasis on religion altogether. The state cannot, in this model, favour or disfavour not just religious positions but any basic moral position, religious or non-religious. It endeavours to treat citizens equally whatever their religious, moral, or metaphysical option, and it gives

⁷ The First view “controls” religion. Remi Brague and Talal Asad are able exponents of this view in cultural studies. See Brague (2019) and Asad (2003).

them all the courtesy of a full hearing in public debate (see Taylor, 2014; 2009).

Taylor's dichotomy between the "religion as point of focus" model versus the "diversity of viewpoints" model remains helpful, but it does not quite capture the legacy of religion in many European states. A more recent threefold typology refines Taylor's analysis: there are passive, assertive and benevolent secular states (Kuru, 2007).

What do each of these models communicate about the public role of religion, for the purpose of our analysis of religious reason versus public reason? Assertive states tend to adopt ideological policies in that they make religion a "target" or "focus" of control, and thus it mirrors Taylor's control model above. The more accommodating or diversity approach would reflect the passive secular states, like the United States. While the wall that separates church and state erected by the founders is stable, any citizen can wear religious symbols or clothing in public institutions, like schools or courtrooms. The dollar bill, it goes without saying, indicates that it is in God that we trust and the pledge of allegiance, still recited by many young students, also refers to the "one Nation under God." This last prepositional clause "under God" was controversially added at a later date, showing how intentional the legislature was in forming a partnership between the secular state and the Christian religious tradition out of which the culture emerged.

David Buckley coined the third type, which escalates the level of accommodation the majority religion enjoys in a secular state. This is called "benevolent secularism," and it is found in some European states. Here religion becomes once more a focal point, but a constructive one, where cooperation between state and religion is regular and reinforced over time. Ideally, the liberal regime should practice "principled distance" in its relationship with various religious communities, so that fair and equal treatment may obtain: "all religions will *not* engage in precisely identical relationships with the state, but all should have had similar opportunities to do so." This should prohibit "hegemonic" religion, on display in the Middle East for example, from becoming an illiberal politics that entrenches the religious perspective of the majority as superior to the minority citizens (Buckley, 2017: 20-24). The European country of the Republic of Ireland, and its public policies concerning Roman Catholicism, occupies much of Buckley's own research on benevolent secularism, and it merits further focused analysis in the next section of the present article.

3. Ireland: An Exemplar of Benevolent Secularism?

Roman Catholicism benefited from an unchecked moral monopoly in the Republic of Ireland from Independence in 1922 up to 1972. In that year, after five decades of hegemony, an amendment (the Fifth Amendment) to the Constitution was passed; it formally and legally discontinued the "special position" the Catholic church long enjoyed in the legislative and judicial priorities which belonged to the newly-formed Irish government of 1922 (<https://assets.gov.ie/6523/5d90822b41e94532a63d955ca76fdc72.pdf>: iv). The moral monopoly of Catholicism, while it continues to fade even now, has yet to relinquish its institutional power in the domain of tax-payer funded, public education. This signals a clear violation of secularism's public reason, of any kind; benevolent secularism (the most cooperative type with religion) in this context can mutate into an illiberal church-state cooperation that extends preferential treatment to its majority tradition.

While in January 1973 the Irish Constitution formally adopted a position of neutrality in matters of religion, and while it also declares in Article 44 that the "State guarantees not to endow any religion," the concrete practice of public reason has yet to catch up with those constitutional theoretical statements. The prospect of an established religion in practice, in other words, is most tangible in primary and secondary education. How is it, in any liberal democracy, that 90% of publicly funded primary school education is Roman Catholic in patronage? My own position is that benevolent secularism, in its Irish manifestation, fails to meet the most basic criteria of secularism as such, that is, it does not treat all religious traditions and moral systems equally, what Buckley calls the secular axiom of "principled difference" (2017: 22-23) whereby the state treats each religious and moral system equally without granting special privileges to the majority religion.

In many other domains, however, the benevolent secularism has achieved a properly secular form of governance in the Republic. Important advances in liberty of conscience and freedom of religion are to be found in the 2015 referendum on marriage equality and gay marriage (where the "yes" vote won and made thereby gay marriage legal) and the two 2018 referenda on abortion and on an outmoded law against "blasphemy," both of which achieved victories in favour of secularism.

And yet, much of the country officially identifies as Roman Catholic. Nowhere is this clearer in the public square than in publicly funded primary and secondary education. It is true that Educate Together schools are much more secular in approach and are making inroads in Ireland. However, in the overwhelming majority of primary and secondary schools, religious education from a Catholic point of view is part of the daily curriculum. True, very recently Ireland's Department of Education has made an "opt out" option available to all students who wish not to participate in religious education (https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0013_2018.pdf). Before this legislation, Muslim and non-religious students, for example, would simply sit quietly in the back of the classroom and work on alternative

assignments or use it for extra study time, rather than participate as full members of the classroom. While the Roman Catholic ethos cultivated in many primary and post-primary schools is neither exclusivist nor suspicious of other religious traditions, it nevertheless fails to enact and promote active dialogue among religious perspectives.⁸ Indeed such alienation in the classroom can contribute to larger consequences, that of discontent among immigrants and minorities.

How can minority (religious) cultures integrate and become part of the host nation and its cultural values if there is little space for alternative expressions of spiritual and religious ethos in the classroom from ages 6 - 18? Taylor notes that alienation and resentment, even tribalism, can occur if host nations (and their religious tradition) are branding immigrants as “outsiders,” even indirectly excluding them, I would argue, by prescribing a Roman Catholic curriculum.⁹

The content covered in religious education lessons, even now, can range from Catholic theology to more sociologically-inflected analysis of world religions. I would be in favour of the latter pedagogy, and a recent policy proposal by the state offers a way for schools to move from catechesis to religious instruction (the latter would teach world religions) (<https://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2018-press-releases/PR18-10-05.html>). however, it is not so much the religious education courses that remains an illiberal prejudice as it is the Roman Catholic patronage and the expectation that first communion be celebrated as part of the school curriculum (for 8 year-old students). Roman Catholic communion thus forms part of the life of publicly funded education. For those who wish not to participate in the state syllabus (because the student is not Roman Catholic) they shall no doubt experience alienation from the student body and be singled out as a religious minority visible for all to see—should they refrain from joining in the school-wide celebration of first communion.

I can imagine a scenario in which Muslim students, non-religious students, and certainly, Protestants and other Christians traditions would either prefer religious education to be taught in the language of their own tradition, or equally plausible, in a broader and less parochial style of pedagogy, one that operates independently of any local parish’s control, not least free from direct involvement with the school in first communion classes. Removing first communion (and later, confirmation) from the life of the school would be a first crucial step toward realigning education with liberal principles, and ultimately, public reason.

Another step would be the removal of prejudicial barriers constitutive of the entry process for enrolment in many secondary schools of Roman Catholic patronage. The Irish Times has reported as recently as 2018 that the State will consider asking, if not requiring, primary and secondary schools to remove “baptism certificates” as a prerequisite for admission

(<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/baptism-barrier-to-be-removed-from-primary-schools-next-year-1.3649317>). It has been called a “baptism barrier” that, as the Minister of Education acknowledges, precludes non-Roman Catholic citizens from accessing publicly funded schools (fairly), public sites which are to be held accountable to liberal democratic principles of secular reason and tax-payer monies.

Roman Catholic patronage in Ireland is waning. Recent statistics released by the Department of Education tell a story of steady decline in Catholic patronage (<https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Statistical-Reports/2018-2019-statistical-bulletin.pdf>). As significant is the 2012 “The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector,” hosted by the Irish government. Its participants recognized the imperative of divesting schools of their religious patronage, at least for many schools (why not all?). It acknowledges that the preference of parents overall is for their children to attend a denominational school and to experience therefore a religious ethos of some kind. However, for myself, I do not see how the state can base a decision about publicly funded education on parent’s illiberal positions. The state (unlike the church and other mediating institutions) should remain faithful to the basic secular shape of education, given it aligns with liberal principles of public reason.

A religious ethos can be cultivated in a parish or church context. The parish (the temple, the mosque, etc.) and family home are free to become important sites of religious education in the stead of the classroom (<https://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Events/Patronage-and-Pluralism-in-the-Primary-Sector/The-Forum-on-Patronage-and-Pluralism-in-the-Primary-Sector-Report-of-the-Forums-Advisory-Group.pdf>). “Liberty of conscience must have an essential place in any constitutional democratic conception. [It] lays down the fundamental basis to be accepted by all citizens as fair and regulative of the rivalry between doctrines.” Toleration here understood by public reason is

⁸ For more on how subtle the “exclusivist paradigm” of theology in a multireligious context, see the illuminating, Johannes Janse van Rensburg (2017).

⁹ Education can be, if not managed with sensitivity, a site of alienation felt on the part of immigrants. For more on this, see Charles Taylor who takes French speaking Canadians in Quebec as a case study in (2012).

“purely political, being expressed in terms of the rights and duties protecting religious liberty in accordance with a reasonable political conception of justice,” and thus can be supported by any reasonable liberal democracy and its public policies, especially those formative of public education (Rawls, 1999: 152).

4. The Wide View of Public Culture

The Irish context forces us to examine more carefully the scope of “publicness” of public culture. An increasing focus on stories about rogue, outlaw and illiberal societies affords us the opportunity to draw boundaries, however loose, between public reason and religious/moral reasons. A clear definition of public reason, what Rawls considers to be a “wide view” of reason, invokes debates constitutive of political theology: it examines the current place in the public of the theological and ecclesial voice, which has as much a right to speak as any other voice, but which must also speak cooperatively like any other voice, enunciated within the parameters of public reason. The task of placing and orienting the religious form of reason in a secular public resonates most loudly in a benevolent liberal regime, manifest in countries like the Republic of Ireland, analysed in the foregoing.

Benevolent secularism, more specifically, challenges us to think about the place to be assumed, and influence to be wielded, by the majority religion. Ireland is no longer homogeneous; even in a small country by population country like the emerald island the demographic sea change means that a plurality of the conceptions of the good and religion/morality is now commonplace, especially in its urban center, Dublin. Certainly, our ancestors, for the purposes of survival, consisted of tightknit, protective tribes. Yet, late modern societies continue to grapple with the public consequences of the spirit of tribalism; the following description of the territorial dynamics of tribalism may resemble a throwback to an obsolete mode of primeval governance, yet it is deliberately written with alarmist flare to signal the recrudescence of such a primitive mindset. The evocation is penned by Zygmunt Bauman’s germanely-titled *Retrotopia*:

“In a territory populated by tribes, conflicting sides shun and doggedly desist from persuading, proselytizing, or converting each other; the inferiority of a member – any member – of an alien tribe is and must need be, and remain, a predestined – eternal and incurable – liability, or at least is seen and treated as such. The inferiority of the other tribe must be its ineffaceable and irreparable condition, and its indelible stigma beyond repair – bound to resist all and any attempt at rehabilitation” (Bauman, 2017: 46).

Cognitive scientists (specifically those interested in political culture) argue tribalism haunts us, precisely because of the eminence it occupies in our evolutionary group psychology. It is thus Janus-faced: it can at once (i) enable cooperation and solidarity key to survival of the group and (ii) condemn otherness, in order to construct the presumption that only safety/security is a good achieved for those with good standing within the tribe (Hobfoll, 2018; Lakoff, 2016).

Of course liberal democracies (in the contemporary landscape) encourage a common will among religiously and morally diverse communities. This surely evokes a high degree of common commitment together with a sense of common identity as “Irish” or “Canadian,” and so forth. In this way, groups or tribes who commit to this “wide view” of common identity do so only on the grounds that they feel genuinely heard and included, as if they contribute with the kind of confidence a real member of the political community can do.

Charles Taylor observes, as a continuance of his well-known work on multiculturalism, that liberalism in nearly all geographies gives rise to “a general truth: that contemporary democracies, as they progressively diversify, will have to undergo redefinitions of their historical identities, which may be far-reaching and painful” (2009: 1161). In the case of Ireland, the divestment of Roman Catholic patronage in the sectors of primary and secondary education will be painful, conflictual, and ultimately, will involve some practicing Roman Catholic families in the moral psychology of separating from insecure resentment.¹⁰ But, as much for Taylor as for Rawls, only an illiberal or rogue state would elevate a metaphysical or religious conception of the good to the place of political justice, using theology to displace wholly the role of public reason. Should public reason remain, as it shall, what might its regulative presence mean for the interrelation between religious reasons and public reason?

The bar remains, and must remain, low for a society to be eligible as or qualify for a liberal society or people. Herein lies the appeal for the present essay of Rawls’ claim that political liberalism entitles a citizen to use religious reason in a public conversation in good faith, with sense and understanding of one’s context, and with the courage to be neither intrusive nor defensive with one’s religious discourse—this constitutes the “wide view of political culture.”

Rawls’ political liberalism, precisely because it is generous or wide, enthusiastically invites debate from all quarters, and it singles out religious reason as most welcome. It frames public reason (and political culture) as wide in that “comprehensive doctrines, religious or nonreligious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time”

¹⁰ For more on the social and political manifestation of resentment, rooted in Nietzsche, Scheler and other pioneers of this public affection, see Warren D. TenHouten (2018).

(Rawls, 1999: 152). The political constitution of public reason qualifies religious reason, however.

I introduce my religious reason, say as a Christian, in support of universal healthcare. But I do not stop there. The second crucial stage is that I attempt, with attentiveness and respect, to supplement my religious reason with a broader language that can adduce public justification for that religious perspective. In other words, my religious reasons never may stand alone, as if I can presume my public audience will grasp or even connect to the theological point I may want to make. I must expand and supplement my theological vocabulary with a public vocabulary, even if not every religious citizen has the capacity or creativity to do so.

There is no formal rule or procedure that I can apply to accomplish this second stage of dialogue, as if there is strict protocol or set of rules to be given in advance. I must instead work out in practice the method of communication in the public exchange of reasons. So, while there are “no restriction or requirements on how religious or secular doctrines are themselves to be expressed,” Christian citizens (for example) can nevertheless take pains to reformulate their religious vocabulary in broader, more-amplified terms, increasing the likelihood that religious forms of reason will gain a genuine hearing. Public reason therefore does not exclude religious/moral discourse, but it does ask that discussants attempt to voice its perspective in relationship with, and with sensitivity to, those who do not share its basic assumptions, values, and beliefs, sacred texts, and so forth.

Let us momentarily invoke the Good Samaritan story in the New Testament. Rawls himself writes, “consider the familiar story of the Good Samaritan. Are the values appealed to properly political values and not simply religious or philosophical values? While the wide view of public political culture allows us, in making a proposal, to introduce the Gospel story, public reason requires us to justify our proposal in terms of proper political values” (Rawls, 1999: 155). How a Christian may accomplish this form of public theology takes imagination, empathy, and the capacity to supplement one’s theological language with other idioms, metaphors, and examples. We do not need to contract or restrict our theological vocabulary but instead amplify and dilate it.

In Luke 10, Jesus communicates the courage necessary Christians need to muster when the weight of cultural-religious norms may prevent the necessary action of helping or rescuing a citizen who is obviously *not* a member of our tribe. All people constitute a family of citizens we can call “our neighbour” (Luke 10.29). In retelling the parable of the Good Samaritan in the public square, we can use alternative examples of groups, in the form of ethnicities, sports teams, or political parties, not least those identities that separate the well-to-do and impoverished refugees. In the actual parable, the man on the side of the road was beaten, stripped and left “half dead” by a group of robbers (Luke 10.30). How many refugees today are quite literally left in that brutal state, stripped and left for dead? Upon arrival on the scene, both a priest and a Levite passed by on the other side of the road. But a Samaritan immediately took pity on the half-dead man. He bandaged his wounds and carried him carefully to an inn. There he nursed him back to health for a day and paid for the innkeeper to look after him. Jesus asks, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (Luke 10.36). The lesson of the Good Samaritan parable, plausibly, is that we should not pass by on the other side of the road but engage with those who need help, the immigrant, the refugee, the transgender individual, the impoverished. In this the Christian parable can be heard anew once recontextualized within the canon of public reason.

Rawls invites us to consider how we may maximize religious reason in just this interpersonal manner: to facilitate and open up practical links between citizens, solidified in part by religious reasons that are fitted within pragmatics of “conversation” demanded by public reason. The second stage of dialogue, in other words, need not involve translation but rather a cooperative attempt to dialogue with the other, and in the process, even form friendships, whereby we see the other as conversation partner.

Some well-known political theorists and cultural commentators have fundamentally misunderstood Rawls, not least the pragmatic framework of political liberalism. I find it necessary to confront, if only briefly, the strawman or category mistake that is the real object of critique, rather than political liberalism as such. Paul Kahn treats Rawls and liberalism generally as a product of unrefined Enlightenment prejudice against religion. He singles out, and condemns, Rawls as a surrogate of intolerance funding ideological secularism, what I would call the assertiveness of perfectionist liberalism (not political liberalism) (see Nussbaum, 2011).

The aspiration not so subtly ensconced in the work of Kahn remains the indignation he feels in the face of the force of assertive secularism and anti-religious partisanship of liberal democracy. He should like, therefore, to resist by “putting liberalism in its place.” To elaborate this perspective, as a scholar he must show in no uncertain terms that liberal regimes are wont to trivialize religion, because “outside of liberalism, there may be faith, but it is a faith corrupted by its rejection of reason” (Kahn, 2005: 120-21). Kahn quite literally thinks that liberal regimes think of religious reasons as irrational, as analogous to a medical ailment, so religious citizens “are excluded from the body politic until their condition has been remedied—or conditions have been established such that they can safely participate in a limited way.”

Liberal theories of public reason, like the one on display in Rawls (Kahn singles out Rawls), descends into dogged ideology, a secular tribalism, one that sees religion as a “pathology” to be overcome by the antidote of the healing power of public rationality.

More recently, Talal Asad would join Kahn in hasty reconsiderations of the Rawlsian model of public reason. For Asad, it would appear that any form of liberal regime that should adopt a pragmatic or neutral stance in matters of morality and religion (like in Rawls’s version of political liberalism) inclines the citizenry also to adopt in their own personal piety a neutral version of morality. Hence it must be that Rawls, and political liberalism, thinks there is “single uncontested vision of the good life—a single theory of what human beings ought to be like” (2018: 171). Equally important, liberal regimes actively cultivate that one version of practical philosophy in the body politic by reconstituting religion as irrational or subjectively idiosyncratic or a strictly private affair—or at least that is an underlying assumption of liberal regimes most visible in their policies that force religion to adapt to modernity.

The understanding of public reason in Rawls is starkly opposite to the portraiture of his work given by Kahn and Asad. It suffices to say that Rawls does place demands on religious formations of reason, but not because they are irrational, but because they are born of a long tradition of reasoning that is not easily grasped by those with low literacy in that tradition. And so, public reason can enable and facilitate more meaningful modes of dialogue between citizens, precisely because there are so many legitimate visions of the good life to keep track of. Rawls writes, “We have seen that political liberalism supposes that there are many conflicting reasonable comprehensive doctrines with their conceptions of the good, each compatible with the full rationality of human persons, so far as that can be ascertained with the resources of political conception of justice. As not before, this reasonable plurality of conflicting and incommensurable doctrines is seen as the characteristic work of practical reason over time under enduring free institutions” (Rawls, 2005: 135). Public reason, I wish to take care here to reinforce, does not subsist in an exhaustive and secure apprehension of pure, Enlightenment reason. It is instead a pragmatic negotiation of the state with religious reasons in the context of the liberties of embodied citizens who employ them. In this, the state asks the citizen to employ responsibly whatever religious reason informs her vision of the good life, a duty performed within the borderland of public reason’s insistence that all citizens exchange with one another in a public language. One may even claim that Rawls, like Fukuyama has recently, that some communitarianism and identity-politics is unavoidable (Fukuyama, 2018). Citizenship involves real flesh-and-blood agents, who live by and see the world through a particular identity, be that religious or not.

Thus: communities of practice, like the temple or the parish, offer a formation to their adherents that makes it impossible for them simply to discard it when speaking on matters of public interest, like marriage, abortion, war, universal healthcare, etc. Rawls states, “Leaving aside the deep question of whether some forms of culture and ways of life are good in themselves (as I believe they are), it is surely, *ceteris paribus*, a good for individuals and associations to be attached to their particular culture and to take part in its common public and civic life. In this way political society is expressed and fulfilled. This is no small thing. It argues for preserving significant room for the idea of a people’s self-determination and for some kind of loose or confederative form of a Society of Peoples” (Rawls, 1999: 61). We may describe this synthesis between communitarianism and political liberalism to represent a communitarian cosmopolitanism (a synthesis I can only gesture toward here). This is, in point of fact, no small thing.

5. Conclusion

Finding a suitable conception of political liberalism, I have argued, is a concern for every liberal regime, from the Republic of Ireland, to India, to the United States, and so forth. While democracies express their unique communities of practice, in which the majority religious tradition sometimes assumes a privileged position in departments and ministries of education, a benevolent secularism must remain faithful to the fundamental axiom of political liberalism: that is, the wide view of the criterion of reciprocity, in which citizens rethink policies and laws in a manner that is mutually beneficial, and thus, reflects equality among citizens.

Another way to state it is to say that I simulate the scenario in which, I as an individual citizen, propose policies that I think not only are reasonable for my community of practice to accept, but also that are reasonable for other communities and groups to accept. In this scenario, I think of myself as an “ideal legislator” (Rawls, 1999: 56). I imagine what statutes and laws increase social harmony among all (think of Rawls’ utopian desire for a social union of social unions). I interrogate in what way they can be justified according to the canon of public reason. My role is fulfilled only properly speaking once religious reason is not denied or domesticated, but recontextualized within the open space of public reason, to the benefit of all. Assertive secularism, it could be argued, though I would need ample space to fill this out comment, is to become more benevolent, just as passive secularism can manage to be more assertive, all while benevolent secularism takes to heart the importance of growing in passivity. Each paradigm widens and thereby enlarges its vision of public reason in relationship with the other paradigms, for the sake of an enlarged

formation of free and equal citizenship.

Only a narrow view, either secular or religious, what is sometimes call comprehensive or perfectionist liberalism or theocracy respectively, would aspire to enact a single vision of the good life. But, like Rawls, we hope that the future of liberal regimes clarifies and develops constructive links between religious modes of reasoning and public reason, for the preservation of both. Do we struggle to maintain a just and free liberal regime in the West and beyond? Is liberal democracy under siege? Are varieties of identity politics fraying the public order?¹¹ Indeed, but nevertheless I find strength in the hope that the human spirit can and does transcend its proclivities toward illiberal tribalism. Rawls asks the same question Kant had asked more than two centuries ago: “If a reasonably just Society of Peoples whose members subordinate their power to reasonable aims is not possible, and human beings are largely amoral, if not incurably cynical and self-centered, one might ask, with Kant, whether it is worthwhile for human beings to live on earth” (Rawls, 1999: 135). One may justly wonder indeed. The liberal order invites us to consider, with full seriousness, how we can construct and nurture an earth worthwhile to inhabit. We do not need to win the world for the whole truth as we see it, for that tribalism indulges in a relentless struggle among incommensurable communities of practice.

The political relation of one group to the other, then, need not reduce to a rivalry of visions of the true, the good, and the beautiful. Public reason does not engage this kind religious, moral, or metaphysical struggle for institutional dominance, Roman Catholic or otherwise. The political conception of justice, grounded in practical reason and the polyvalence of human rationality, does not decide among truth claims or moral narratives. It simply supposes there are “many conflicting and incommensurable conception of the good, each compatible with the full rationality of human persons” (epigraph). The Irish government can continue to realize and enact public policy in accord with this wide view of political liberalism, just as it at once downplays it benevolence and accentuates its secular commitment to public reason.

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¹¹ Some would argue that this is currently the case, from Venezuela to Ukraine to Turkey to the United States. See Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018).

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