

## **Why Politics Needs Religion: The Place of Religious Arguments in the Public Square**

Brendan Sweetman.

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The purpose of this book is to discredit root and branches the prevailing position among American academic theorists that religion and religious arguments have no place in public debate. To do this the author tries to show that these theorists are not themselves neutral but subscribe to a set of beliefs in view of which either they too should be denied access and voice or (the author's preference) believers of all sorts should be free to participate in public discourse.

The author, who was educated in Dublin, Ireland, is a philosopher. This book, though, is only intermittently philosophical. More often it is a strident diatribe against a group of influential people who, he alleges, have conspired to exclude religion and religious arguments from the process of public policy deliberation and formulation. The card-carrying members of this group are secularists or, as they are known in some quarters, liberals (177). They tend to think of themselves as individualists. But, make no mistake about it, they are organized – so organized, in fact, that they constitute a religion and/or a church and have a faith. Moreover, the spokespersons for their beliefs are priests. (See, e.g., 111, 213-214.) These priests are mostly philosophers but also included are agnostic astronomers and others whose hubris prevents them from appreciating the altogether reasonable evidence and arguments for the teachings of traditional religion. The latter, according to the author's frequent mantra, are more reasonable than those of secularism; but the secularists are able to maintain their control over public debate by keeping the views of their opponents from getting a hearing (158, 169, 244, 245 n. 13).

Sweetman's main concern is to get certain moral positions favored by the religious right enacted into law – notably, prohibitions on all abortions, euthanasia, gay marriage, and extramarital sex (140). Conceding that persuasive arguments may be lacking for a Christian's "second order" beliefs, e.g., the doctrine of the Trinity, he insists that the aforementioned "first order" beliefs are not only rational but are more rational than arguments in opposition. Moreover, they involve objective (sometimes called absolute) truth and as such do not fall victim to the relativism that Descartes set in motion and secularists have spread throughout the world (44, 146, 163). That Sweetman favors legislating his moral views clearly reveals a bias on his part, since he faults secularists for wanting their views enacted into law (192). But,

though he says legalizing a woman's right to choose coerces those morally opposed who have to live in such a permissive society (192-193), he remains open to living in a society that has found legalization of euthanasia rational (190, 232-233). The difference may lie in his assertion that the most "persuasively reasonable" belief of traditional religion "is surely the belief that the foetus is a human being and is worthy of protection in law" (176). This assertion is a response to secularist John Rawls's more permissive stance (177); but it leaves unaddressed the fact that the iconic theologian Thomas Aquinas, for one, did not find it persuasively reasonable and the surely relevant claim that a pregnant woman is also a human being with rights.

Sweetman's principal strategy for bringing the status of religious beliefs up to a par with that of secularism in public debate is to (1) characterize any set of beliefs, however arrived at, as a worldview, (2) claim as an intermediate position that religion and worldview each consists of a set of beliefs, and finally (3) declare that the terms religion and worldview are interchangeable (47). This introduction of 'worldview' as a term of art is hardly original, nor is it inappropriate; but it could have been developed with more attention to its theoretical precedents (Byrne 1998). Instead, to move from suggestion to declaration he says, first, what differences there may be between a religion and secularism do not affect his argument (33), second, secularism has all the formal features of a religion (79, 138), third, describing secularism as a religion, as some do, is appropriate given their similar structures (59-60, 81, 98, 212); fourth, they differ not in form but only in content, i.e., as to belief in God (48, 82). Rhetorical conclusion: secularism is a religion (69-70, 87, 96). On the basis of this terminological legerdemain, Catholicism is a worldview as is secularism, Marxism, evolution, and perhaps the theory of gravity as well; and, inversely, secularism and Marxism are religions. None is privileged, least of all secularism, in spite of its proponents' insistence that it is neutral hence properly in charge in the public sphere. State neutrality, after all, is a myth (202). So the most rational worldview should be in charge, and that is religious belief.

The process whereby Sweetman defends his claim that (his) religious beliefs are more rational than those of secularism owes more to carnival barking than to Logic 101. It begins with his assertion that worldviews can be ranked according to their degree of rationality, which implies, be it noted, that rationality is something quantifiable (44). Similarly, he asserts that beliefs differ as to the degree of faith they require (53). Such casual epistemological forays actually suggest linking faith and/or worldview with probability and/or opinion; and by following this link one would come upon many careful studies and even sub-

disciplines (e.g., Cooke) that might enhance one's philosophical acumen regarding beliefs. But Sweetman has a different agenda that is better served by treating the reader to an Elmer Gantry-style bait and switch: start by interesting the listener in your claim; then after the listener has stepped into your tent, announce that you won't provide "a robust defense of the rationality of religious belief" because "all that is necessary [for religious beliefs to have a role in politics] is that I hold that they are rational." Determining their rationality is, after all, what is to be determined in public debate (107-109). And in any event to do so beforehand would be too time-consuming (98).

Apparently what Sweetman seeks for (his) religious views is not just equality before but dominance of the law (177-183). For, on his view, democracy can only flounder if based on the shifting sands of relativism that secularism propagates (181, 185). And that is why the Founding Fathers (he says) were committed to God and God's moral law (152). And, apparently, it is why "most religious believers [even radical Islamists?] would accept the democratic form of government" (188). For, as this . author views the world, the troublemakers are not those with a high degree of religious faith. The source of violence, says Sweetman, is secularism, via the ACLU, the NEA, the media. and protestors at economic summit meetings (149). He never drops the other shoe, i.e., he is silent about how dangerous religion can be if and as used as a political tool. Apparently he is aware of the religion-sponsored bloodshed that is recorded in history because he says the claim that religion is dangerous can't be taken seriously in the US today (147). Could this mean, though, that he really has not considered the consequences of turning the Christian right into the base of the Republican Party? Has it escaped his notice that technically unqualified Christian right appointees to government posts are eschewing both researchers' recommendations and open debate as they introduce anti-scientific government policies, e.g., regarding birth control, sexuality education, or global warming? And does he really not know about the influence, say, of evangelical rapture-seekers on US foreign policy with regard to Israel, which according to their analyses is the locus of the Messiah's imminent return?

In short, Sweetman's book would not advance one's philosophical education except perhaps as an illustration of a besieged mentality or as a case study in how not to develop a controversial position. As for the sources on which he relies, Richard John Niehaus is a no-holds-barred opponent of anything liberal, and Robert Kraynak favors Augustine's Two Cities model over any linking of religion with democracy; Michael Perry, though, is a deservedly respected analyst of the legal status of religion in the United States. As

Sweetman himself says, works by Kent Greenawalt (*Private Consciences and Public Reasons*, Oxford, 1995) and Robert Audi (*Religious Commitment and Secular Reason*, Cambridge, 2000) are exceptionally belief-sensitive presentations of the pro-secularist stance. Regrettably, no anthology of political philosophers' views is available that covers the separation issue, say, from Rousseau to Ricoeur. The Audi/Wolterstorff debate (*Religion in the Public Square*, Rowman & Littlefield, 1997) is an accessible entree to the subject.

Background reading that would contribute to one's understanding of some of the broader issues include: Edmund F. Byrne, "Mission in Modern Life: A Public Role for Religious Belief," 20<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Philosophy (*Paideia*, 1998), posted at [www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Poli/PoliByrne.htm](http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Poli/PoliByrne.htm); Roger M. Cooke, *Experts in Uncertainty: Opinion and Subjective Probability in Science* (Oxford University Press, 1991); Diane di Marco and Carole Joffe, "The Religious Right and the Reshaping of Sexual Policy: An Examination of Reproductive Rights and Sexuality Education," *Sexuality Research & Social Policy* (March 2007) 4:1, pp. 67-92; Arthur P. Mendel, *Vision and Violence* (University of Michigan Press, 1992); Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics* (Scribner's, 1940); Duane Oldfield, "The Evangelical Roots of American Unilateralism: The Christian Right's Influence and How to Counter It," *Foreign Policy in Focus* (March 2004), posted at <http://www.fpiif.org/pdf/papers/SR2004evangelical.pdf>; Martin Seliger, *Ideology and Politics* (George Allen & Unwin, 1976); Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Prentice-Hall, 1995); Henry O. Thompson, *World Religions in War and Peace* (McFarland, 1988).

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