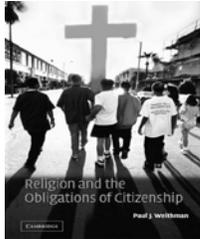


Beyond Secularism

Justin B. Mutter



Paul J. Weithman

Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship

Cambridge University Press, 2006

227 pages

ISBN: 0521027808

The idea of the ‘secular’ is a common feature of modern democratic life. Since the classic formulations of Max Weber, social theorists and democratic citizens alike have understood public institutions as categorically separate from religious ones. The secular has offered us a way of making this separation possible. Modern philosophers turned to ‘secular reason’ as a resource for differentiating public from religious motivations. Similarly, state bureaucracies championed the ‘value-neutral’ goal of modernisation as a replacement for value-laden religious aims, and encouraged the privatisation of religious belief to safeguard institutional life from undue religious influence.

While the secular undoubtedly marks a welcome development in Western public discourse, it has not been without its problems. One problem is empirical: most commentators now concede that we are hard pressed to find a moment in the history of democracy when religious ideas and institutions have not maintained a strong public presence. As political philosopher Paul J. Weithman writes in *Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship*, it is now uncontested that ‘religion is one of the most potent political forces in the contemporary world.’ Given the vitality of religion in purportedly secular contexts, we may need to revise our notions of just how secular these contexts have been, are, or indeed ever could be. But this problem invites deeper questions: What does it mean today for something to *be secular* in the first place? What exactly does the ‘secular’ signify? In what precise ways can or should it continue to modify democratic practice?

According to Weithman, these questions are of special importance to current debates over the meaning of democratic citizenship. While few would contest the claim that politicians—as representatives and protectors of diverse communities—must not base their decisions on religious conviction, there is a great deal more dispute concerning the relationship between religious orientations and the contributions of the general citizenry. If political officials must appeal to secular reason to legitimise their actions, what kind of reasons may citizens use to support their own public claims? Are religious reasons acceptable?

One frequent response to these questions is to assert that, because citizens are co-sovereigns ‘who [are] entitled to take part in bringing about’ political outcomes, a citizen’s political ‘inputs’ must be put forth in non-religious form. The public forum, where citizens engage one another as citizens, should make use of secular reasons accessible to all members of society. On this account, religious reasons fail the test of accessibility.

As compelling as this logic may be, Weithman believes that it is doomed to failure. *Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship* outlines two main arguments for why this conventional view should be discarded. The first draws from historical and empirical data in the United States. Weithman reminds us that citizenship does not always and everywhere accompany the privilege of being a citizen. The United States, of course, has a long and troubled history of dissociating

Also in this Issue:

Warming Up to Al Gore
by Jacob Foster

The Making of Genocide
by Nanor Kebranian

Pitchers of Warm Piss
by John-Paul McCarthy

Unravelling Walter Benjamin
by Will Norman

Cosmopolitan or Clash of Civilisations?
by Tim Southommasane

Linguists and George W. Bush
by Michel Paradis

Picasso, the Critic, and the Pangolins
by Alexandra Harris

How to Be Happy
by Andrew Hay

International Grassroots Feminism?
by Alix Rule

Inside *Lucky Jim*
by Peter Snow

Crisis of the Charismatic
by Matthew Pennycook

The Life of Robert Southey
by Monika Class

Beyond Secularism
by Justin B. Mutter

From the Editor

Contributors

citizenship from certain contingents of its citizenry, namely through restrictions (whether overt or covert) based on race, gender and socioeconomic class.

For Weithman, these histories indicate that a citizen's ability to express his or her citizenship is often highly unstable. More pointedly, citizenship is an 'achievement' which 'requires that those who are entitled to play it be *equipped* to do so.' Citizenship must be 'realised' before we can even have a debate about what sort of reasons are and are not legitimate for talk among citizens. At this point Weithman turns to a wealth of empirical data on religious institutions in American public life. He argues cogently that this data reveals religious institutions to have been crucial sources of civic argument and egalitarian discourse in American public life.

Although Weithman concedes there are many exceptions, the general rule seems to be that religious and religiously-affiliated organisations often help citizens achieve citizenship in two ways. First, they comprise the most active sector of voluntary associations working to remove social and economic barriers to citizenship through charitable programs. Second, they are themselves forums in which debates regarding political decision-making are nourished. Weithman thus arrives at his primary challenge to the standard requirement for secular reasons: If religious communities are often important providers of social capital, why should citizens who benefit from this provision remove the trappings of religiosity from their public commitments? 'To maintain that churches should not be involved in politics is, in effect, to require that they not facilitate the citizenship of large numbers of Americans.' A 'properly democratic' respect for the need to affirm the citizenship of *all* citizens would, for instance, celebrate rather than downplay the immeasurable role that African-American churches played in the civil rights movement.

Following this objection, Weithman turns to analytic problems in Anglo-American political philosophy. Here his principal interlocutors are John Rawls and the philosopher-theologian Robert Audi, both of whom defend the requirement of secular reason for the practice of citizenship. Weithman's main protest—which relies (ironically) on the Rawlsian distinction between a concept and a conception—is to remind us that while citizens can be united around the general *concept* of citizenship, their particular *conceptions* of that concept are often legitimately plural. This is simply to say that citizens frequently have very different ideas about what good and proper citizenship looks like. The burgeoning academic literature on political ethics—especially regarding deliberative democracy and the appropriate uses of citizenship—testifies to this basic fact of diversity. Ostensibly, argues Weithman, democratic discourse should also include reasonable debate about the terms of debating itself. The problem with the requirement of public, secular reason is that it attempts to regulate citizenship in ways that restrict this debate. Weithman stresses that his protest does not deny that the 'Rawlsian specification is an attractive liberal democratic ideal.' He merely suggests that it 'does not...capture a form our citizenship *must* take or a form of civility we are *obliged* to pursue.'

Adopting the principle of secular reason as the only legitimate basis for citizens' inputs may constrain their ability to truly be co-sovereigns, since part of the authority citizens have over the political world is the authority to determine what considerations count as reasons. As a citizen, then, I am certainly free to contest a justifying or motivating reason for a political outcome that one of my fellow citizens presents in a public forum. I am even free to express frustration if I find his or her reason 'inaccessible' to me on account of its being explicitly religious in origin, and to request an alternative approach. What I cannot do, however, is to imply that my interlocutor has somehow 'violated some moral obligation' of citizenship simply by offering religious reasons in public. In other words, religious reasons must not be discounted merely because they are religious and not secular. According to Weithman, this would be to deny the very efficacy of the democratic process in which diverse conceptions of citizenship are always at play.

Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship is an indispensable contribution to the debate over the role of 'secularity' in discourse among citizens. It is a book of wide significance for discussions beyond the discipline of political philosophy. One might wonder, however, whether Weithman goes far enough in his critique of secular reason. In particular he neglects to ask whether we have ever really achieved 'the secular' in democratic practice. The problem with neglecting this question is that it ignores an increasing body of scholarship from social theorists and intellectual historians who remind us that the emergence of the idea of the secular in Western democracies

rested on thorny assumptions. Prominent among these is the Enlightenment suggestion that religious orientations are indeed categorically different from secular ones. Has this suggestion ever been proved? Religious persons who object to binary opposition between the religious and the secular are quick to point out that secular reason oftentimes looks a lot like just another Rawlsian ‘comprehensive doctrine,’ characterized by its own set of value-laden claims about what forms democratic practice should take. It is no surprise, then (as Tariq Ramadan and others have argued), that Muslim citizens living in the West resent the common treatment of Islam in media outlets as an antithesis of secular democracy. As Weithman implies, so too do Christian citizens aligned with the American political left begrudge Democratic leaders who wish—in kneejerk reaction to the influence of the GOP’s religious right—to marginalise ‘religious reasons’ from their party’s platform.

The key issue here is simple: often the inherited language we adopt in political discussion can be divisive and disingenuous because we overlook the baggage that comes with it. We are living in a time when the place of the secular in our public lexicon needs to be carefully revisited. During this revisiting we must be open to the possibility that the idea of the secular is more disruptive than constructive to the task of nurturing sincere and efficacious public conversation, especially in a global setting where religion continues to flourish. As citizens hoping to express our citizenship, we might do well to be wary of discounting reasons offered by our co-citizens primarily because they originate in religious motivations. The danger of the secular as a public ideal is that it suggests that a language exists above and beyond value-laden commitments that all reasonable citizens should embrace. Even if it is possible to achieve this neutral language, in favouring it we risk trivialising the quite reasonable earnestness in which many citizens daily express their values in the public square.

One alternative to privileging secularity is to opt instead for the language of *pluralism*. Some of Weithman’s colleagues—like William Galston and William Connolly—are exploring this option as a way of levelling the playing field between religious and non-religious behaviour in the public forum. This is a promising move, and it is regrettable that Weithman fails to consider it. Perhaps our most pressing task is to approach pluralistic settings as opportunities for democratic, honest, and respectful exchange about the political values we hold—whether religiously or non-religiously—rather than as problematic stages on the way to the secular. Perhaps the most worrisome feature of continued debates over public secularity is that we still have not learned to move prudently past them.

Justin B. Mutter is an M.Sc. student in the history of science, history and technology at Balliol College, Oxford.