

*Freedom of Religion and the Schools:
Evolution, Crosses, Scarves and Prayers*

Pluralism in a Secular World

by

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Abstract

In the closing decades of the 20th Century, a transition from Enlightenment-spawned secularism to a world peppered by emerging radical theocracies has been widely reported. Primarily, the urge to live under theocratic rule is found among the three Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Karen Armstrong, in her seminal pre-9/11 book *The Battle for God*, argues that the forces at work are similar in all three traditions. Where the “battle for God” goes is one of the great questions facing the world today.

As we have seen, freedom of religion and the schools is one place where the forces of secularism and religion clash. This essay, *Pluralism in a Secular World*, begins by providing some context for the drift towards theocracy that is clearly underway. The paper continues by arguing that it is through active support of pluralism in the public sector that mutual respect and understanding may develop among those with hardening religious and secular positions. With mutual respect and understanding comes the opportunity to honor different religious traditions while preserving the non-religious (secular)

institutions of society. This is admittedly naive and indeed, idealistic, but I believe acting pluralistically is a strong thread in the warp and woof of secularism.

Introduction

Pluralism comes in many flavors—economic, political, cultural, ethical, and religious to name some. Pluralism as a concept recognizes that often many points of view are at play in a given argument, theory, philosophy, or social/cultural situation. At the beginning of pluralism is the belief that each perspective, even minority ones, have validity. This is significant because the pluralistic point of view rejects the absolute in favor of universal respect for differences.

At the expense of pluralism, secularism, and democracy, the three Abrahamic religions are becoming increasingly fundamentalistic in their battle to win God over to their particular doctrine and dogma.

Consider Karen Armstrong's *The Battle for God*. It begins this way: "One of the most startling developments of the late twentieth century has been the emergence within every major religious tradition of a militant piety popularly known as 'fundamentalism.'" She continues several sentences later: "Fundamentalists have no time for democracy,

pluralism, religious toleration, peacekeeping, free speech, or the separation of church and state”¹. If you are unfamiliar with *The Battle for God*, I commend it to you.

Each of the major Abrahamic religions, in its most uncompromising strains, insists on the “truth” of its claim to God. Such claims play out in the world’s secular institutions all the time, and for the purposes of this round table, at schools in Europe, America, Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere. In general, western secular institutions uphold democratic ideals in an effort to homogenize increasingly diverse populations. With regard to our topic—freedom of religion and the schools—my question is: Can a commitment to pluralism possibly provide a bridge to respectful secular policies by politicians and administrators to the benefit of students and faculty and ultimately to society?

Pluralism

At the heart of pluralism is the notion that one set of values or beliefs deemed basic and correct by one party will differ from those espoused by others. These differences, however, need not spark clashes between groups. In fact, the differences are to be honored. Significantly, from the pluralist’s perspective, it is inappropriate to prioritize conflicting

values or beliefs, i.e. *A* is better than *B*. Both *A* and *B* carry equal validity. The point? *This* is not more important than *that*; *A* does not trump *B*. Pluralism by definition rejects rules of hierarchy by honoring multiple positions as equally valid and so acceptable. Co-existence of values and beliefs is a key to pluralism.

Some say pluralism is “relativism” in disguise. “Relativism,” however, holds that any collection of ideas are always in relation to others and the values associated with them at one moment may change when new circumstances are introduced. Unlike pluralism, in the end, relativism often contains judgment, i.e. ‘Regarding *this* circumstance, my position is correct and yours is wrong.’ A specific example of relativism: ‘It’s bad to murder, but it’s OK to execute criminals.’ Although relativism argues against absolutes (‘Who am I to judge you and what you do?’ or ‘Anything goes!’), the relativist’s position may end up being hardened and uncompromising.

Returning to pluralism, the world gets a bit smaller every day.

Immigration to America and Europe has been staggering in the past thirty years. People from around the world seek improved economic lives and so they go to where education and work are. Moreover,

refugees from trouble-spots have migrated to safer places, places of promise. And naturally, all of these people have brought with them their personal and cultural heritage, some might say baggage. Vast neighborhoods in Manchester, Paris, Detroit, Munich, Amsterdam, and Brussels boast foreign cultural and social enclaves within the political boundaries of their host countries. The impact to medical and social services, educational institutions, housing, transportation, and local government is huge. Which, of course, is why we come together here in Oxford: to discuss the implications of these momentous pressures and changes.

One tenant of the Law of Unintended Consequences says that the significance of an event may not be revealed until much later. Certainly an unanticipated consequence of post-WWII immigration and migration and the wide-spread economic growth of the last fifty years is the dramatic change in the demographics of westernized countries. The new diversity, however, has not necessarily been accompanied by acceptance or tolerance of new-comers in many places. Unlike the 19th century desire by immigrants for assimilation into host cultures (the USA is a good example), recent immigrants often eschew change in favor of maintaining their native habits and mores. In addition, although recent arrivals most often fill an

economic position at the bottom of the pile, resentments and stereotyping has arisen among locals. 'Who are these people? They're different from us. We're losing our identity and way of life. They take our jobs and use our schools and health care.' Certainly these attitudes are evident in the United States, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, and Denmark, as well as other countries.

As the obvious differences—language, clothing and hair styles, skin color, marriage customs, and religion—morph into threats to the status quo, what is “different” quickly becomes what is inferior and unacceptable. While the institutions of society try to adjust, lines become drawn around any given issue or group of foreigners. Which, of course, is where we find ourselves now with regards to freedom of religion and the schools as seen in the issue of teaching evolution, wearing crosses, head scarves, reciting prayers, etc.

My interest is, again, to ask, Can a commitment to pluralism possibly provide a bridge to respectful secular policies by politicians and administrators to the benefit of students and faculty and ultimately to society? Specifically, might an attitude of religious pluralism provide the starting point for reconciliation in other social and cultural places of friction?

According to Karen Armstrong, the resurgence of religion—most notably fundamentalism—is at the center of many of the social stresses we face today. We are in a transition period when “our religious experience in the modern world has changed, and because an increasing number of people regard scientific rationalism alone as true, they have often tried to turn the *mythos* of their faith into *logos*”² (*Battle for God*, p. xvii).

Without exploring all of Armstrong’s ideas, suffice it to say the fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam has accompanied immigrants and refugees to their new homes. The “certain truths” of dogma and doctrine have come to lock minds and hearts, thereby blocking them from learning about other religious ideas and ideals (i.e. those unlike my own), not to mention the social mores and history of host countries.

Moreover, a pre-occupation with being “right” (theological self-righteousness by owning certain “truths”) has replaced a general acceptance and tolerance of religious diversity following WWII. Likewise, coming together to live harmoniously in community has been sacrificed to the god of religious fundamentalism, particularly

among some Muslims in Europe and the Middle East, some Protestant Christians in the U.S., and also among some Orthodox Jews in Israel and America, not to mention the increasing absolutism of Roman Catholicism under Pope Benedict XVI.

Why is pluralism an antidote to fundamentalism? For one, pluralism may be the only antidote that can cure the fundamentalist cancer we live with. As a practical matter, it is pluralism that explicates one's own religion while acknowledging and inviting knowledge of other faiths. Pluralism argues for tolerance in diversity and inclusion verses exclusion. With pluralism, neither separation nor integration prevail, but a co-existent, parallel place for all religious view points triumphs.

Secularism is a child of the Enlightenment. Since the 17th and 18th centuries, religion has been constantly challenged by rationalism. Perhaps the most stunning example is Darwin's theory of evolution. How time, facts, and God were viewed changed dramatically a hundred and forty years ago. No longer were ideas processed first through the lens of religion, but rather, through scientific methodology. Facts came to dominate all debate and things spiritual were relegated to the dust bin. Secularism especially ejects religion from civil affairs, that is, government and the schools.

(As a paradoxical aside, the growth of fundamentalism relies on a rational acceptance of the “facts” of Scripture—the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible, or the Qur’an—rather than the more subtle, ancient interpretations of sacred material. The Enlightenment’s rationalism itself, in other words, hijacked Abrahamic religious sensibilities and reformed them with “provable” Scriptural “truth” at the head and emotion at the heart of faith, but compassion and love nowhere to be found.)

Returning to secularism, again paradoxically, it is both in government and the schools that the lessons of civics, history, culture, and society should be taught and enacted. How, when, and where do youngsters learn about the responsibilities of democracy, tolerance, and diversity, if not in school? And yet, it is a very blind eye that does not see the critical importance that religion plays in society and culture, and especially its effect in the global village of this young 21st century. Karen Armstrong argues that religion itself and the place of religion in our communities, schools, governments, and other institutions will shape the coming decades. I agree.

The question then becomes, what responsibility do government and the schools have in educating the youth of this small planet in the basics of civics and civility, including an acceptance of religious diversity through pluralism?

Summary

I dare say, the need for religious pluralism in the face of rampant fundamentalism is nearly as critical to the survival of our planet as is a solution to global warming. A universal political will and courage needs be mustered to teach survey courses about all religions in the schools at many grade levels and to insist that all religions hold their own truths; the world is large enough for many faces of God. Likewise it's vital to emphasize that Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have far more in common than not. Should young people be fairly and honestly taught the history and great virtues of each religion, understanding and acceptance of them will have a chance to incubate and grow. And, among the most critical elements of developing religious pluralism as policy, is providing the opportunity for children of various faiths to know each other as individuals and to teach each other about their religious beliefs. The very best of secularism—carefully looking at the facts about Islam, Judaism, and Christianity—may just open to coming

generations a way to live in harmony with religious pluralism as a foundation of civil and democratic society.

I conclude by saying, wouldn't it have been nice to have had Jews and Muslims among us this week?

Thank you.

¹ Karen Armstrong, The Battle For God, (New York: Ballentine Books, 2000), p. xi.

² Ibid., p. xvii.