

SECULARISM, FAITH AND FREEDOM*

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Most people who would call themselves secularists would probably defend their position with reference to certain ideals of freedom and equality in society. They are opposing, they say, any kind of theocracy, any privilege given to an authority that is not accountable to ordinary processes of reasoning and evidence. A secular society is one in which it is possible to have fair and open argument about how common life should be run because everyone argues on the same basis; the ideal of secularity means that there is such a thing as 'public reason'. Argument that arises from specific commitments of a religious or ideological nature has to be ruled out of court. If arguments of that kind are admitted, there is a threat to freedom because assertions are being made which are supposed to be beyond challenge and critique. Behind all this lies the strong Enlightenment conviction that authority that depends on revelation must always be contested and denied any leverage in the public sphere.

It is a powerful set of presuppositions, whose effects may be read in the work of politicians and columnists and public intellectuals across Europe and North America. It is often allied with some version of the distinction proposed by Isaiah Berlin between 'negative' and 'positive' liberty – negative liberty being what you have in a society where government allows a maximal level of individual choice and does not seek to prescribe moral priorities, and positive liberty being the situation arising in a society where government sees itself as having a mission to promote one or another ideal of emancipation – as having a specific agenda. The true liberal, as opposed to the 'romantic', must be committed to negative liberty. The pursuit of posi-

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tive liberty leads to ideological tyranny, to the closing-down of argument and the ironing-out of plurality.

This is a distinction that has entrenched itself pretty firmly in some kinds of political discourse, and the suspicion of positive – ‘romantic’ – liberty is a good deal stronger than when Berlin delivered his celebrated lecture on the subject in 1958. It fits well with the assumption that a ‘secular’ perspective is the default position for a liberal and intelligent society. The sort of liberal analysis I have been sketching insists that government has no alternative but to take people’s accounts of what they want at face value and work to enable them to be realised without interference, simply guaranteeing that individuals and groups do not harm each other in the process. As Michael Ignatieff writes in his biography of Isaiah Berlin,¹ ‘a liberal does not believe in a hierarchy of inner selves (higher, lower, true, false) or believe that there can ever be a political solution to the experience of inner human division’. In a climate where the ‘end of history’ is proclaimed with the same enthusiasm with which the ‘end of ideology’ was once greeted, there is bound to be a certain wariness about the suggestion that basic critical questions still need to be asked concerning human capacity or destiny as such, or that there is some serious difference between what people claim to want and what is in their true interest.

I shall be arguing that ‘secular’ freedom is not enough; that this account of the liberal society dangerously simplifies the notion of freedom and ends up diminishing our understanding of the human person. The tempting idea that there is always an adequate definition of what everyone will recognise as public and reasonable argument needs to be looked at hard, not in order to re-establish the dominance of some unchallengeable ruling discourse, religious or ideological, but to focus the question of how a society deals with the actual variety and potential collision of understandings of what is properly human. A debate about, for example, the status of the embryo in relation to genetic research, or the legalisation of assisted dying, or the legal support given to marriage will inevitably bring into play arguments that are not restricted to pragmatic assessments of individual or group benefit. While there can be no assumption that a government will or should *assume* that such arguments must be followed, there must equally be no assumption that these arguments may not be heard and weighed, that an issue has to be decided solely on arguments that can be owned by no particular group.

¹ *Isaiah Berlin: a Life* (London, 1998), p. 226.

This suggests that political freedom is more complex than the licence to pursue a set of individual or group projects with minimal interference. It also needs to be the freedom to ask some fundamental questions about the climate and direction of a society as shown in its policy decisions, to raise in the public sphere concerns about those issues that are irreducibly to do with collaboration, the goods that are necessarily *common*. For example what makes a good educational system for a nation is not a matter best left to the private agenda of an one any person or group. Likewise, our environmental crisis is perhaps the most dramatic instance of a challenge we cannot manage on the basis of individualism or even with the existing mechanisms of merely national policy-making. The state cannot just produce answers to such questions on the grounds of defending Berlin's 'negative liberty'. Nor can this answer the question of how the personal liberties of those who cannot exercise what we should normally think of as reasoned consumer choice of the sort we take for granted – the unborn, the disabled, prisoners – can be securely grounded in a philosophy oriented towards negative liberty. A debate that addressed all these concerns at the needed depth would have to draw in larger considerations. A political freedom that was extended to non-choosers or non-consumers, and that included the freedom to push foundational questions about our relation to the rising generation or to the material environment, could not, I believe, be adequately rooted in a view that defined the legitimacy of a state primarily in terms of its ability to defend maximal individual choice.

There is of course, *pace* Michael Ignatieff, a genuine question about how what people say they want, or who people say they are, is manipulated and largely determined by different kinds of economic and political power. With all the necessary cautions one would want to enter against espousing a simplistic view of political emancipation – Berlin clearly has in mind the crassness of Marxist-Leninism as practised in the old Soviet Union – there are surely issues around the questioning and criticism of certain modes of social and economic control without which 'liberal' society becomes as static and corrupt as old-style state socialism. Political freedom must involve the possibility of questioning the way things are administered – not simply in the name of self-interest (as if the sole ground for a legitimate government were its ability to meet consumer wants) but in the name of some broader vision of what political humanity looks like, a vision of optimal exchange and mutual calling to account and challenging between persons, through which each one developed more fully their ability to act meaningfully or constructively. This is a good deal more than the liberty to

pursue a private agenda, limited only by the rather vague prohibition on harm to others (always difficult to pin down). And, to take another theme that some have argued to be basic for the understanding of liberalism, it is more than the liberty of a detached individual to 'redescribe' the world in art, imagination and philosophy. Liberty is more than consumer choice; and it is also more than irony. The British Marxist philosopher, Roy Bhaskar, in a detailed critique of the liberal constructivism of Richard Rorty, notes that once we have identified the sources of injustice or cruelty or social stagnation, once we have formulated a language in which to think about them, we are bound to be involved, like it or not, in an incipient process of *public* change – 'action rationally directed to transforming, dissolving or disconnecting the structures and relations which explain the experience of injustice'.² Shifts in language and explanation that arise in the wake of critical understanding are bound to make different kinds of action and therefore different kinds of decision possible. Not to act in the public sphere in consequence of such new possibilities is to make an active choice for stagnation. If ironic redescription is no more than words it is not really ironic at all; it remains dependent on the systems and power-relations it claims to challenge.

But of course to speak of a 'vision' of proper exchange and mutuality is to raise the question that obviously worried Berlin. How do we avoid a prescriptive approach, an imposition of one version of what human integrity or flourishing means? This anxiety is one of the driving forces of what I shall call *programmatically* secularism. This assumes (to pick up again the points made briefly at the beginning of this lecture) that any religious or ideological system demanding a hearing in the public sphere is aiming to seize control of the political realm and to override and nullify opposing convictions. It finds specific views of the human good outside a minimal account of material security and relative social stability unsettling, and concludes that they need to be relegated to the purely private sphere. It assumes that the public expression of specific conviction is automatically offensive to people of other (or no) conviction. Thus public support or subsidy directed towards any particular group is a collusion with elements that subvert the harmony of society overall.

These are the anxieties that have been very vocally shared in the UK over recent weeks and months, and they will be familiar from elsewhere in

² *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom* (Oxford, 1991), p. 72.

Europe. At a time of widespread concern about social disruption and worse, it is perhaps inevitable that there should be some anxiety about visible signs of difference. Yet the implication of this secularist rhetoric is complex and deeply problematic. By defining ideological and religious difference as if they were simply issues about individual preference, almost of private 'style', this discourse effectively denies the seriousness of difference itself. Every specific conviction, it seems, *must* be considered as if it were individually chosen for reasons that are bound to be out of the reach of any sort of public argument. This account suggests that public reasoning is purely instrumental; it is what goes on in the public sphere simply to test more and less administratively successful methods of continuing the provision of undisturbed public order. In other words there is nothing fundamental to argue about in public. The problem is not only – as Pope Benedict has suggested – that we have lost confidence in reason and its universality; it is also that reason's territory has shrunk. Because there is no tribunal to adjudicate arguments between basic commitments about God, humanity and the universe, it is assumed that there is therefore no exchange possible between them, no work of understanding and discernment, no mapping of where common commitments start and stop. On this account there is public reason and there is private prejudice, and thus no way of negotiating or reasonably exploring real difference.

If programmatic secularism leads us to this point it threatens to end up in political bankruptcy. This is why I want to press the distinction between 'programmatic secularism' and what some have called '*procedural* secularism'. It is the distinction between the empty public square of a merely instrumental liberalism, which allows maximal private licence, and a crowded and argumentative public square which acknowledges the authority of a legal mediator or broker whose job it is to balance and manage real difference. The empty public square of programmatic secularism implies in effect that the almost value-free atmosphere of public neutrality and the public invisibility of specific commitments is enough to provide sustainable moral energy for a properly self-critical society. But it is not at all self-evident that people can so readily detach their perspectives and policies in social or political discussion from fundamental convictions that are not allowed to be mentioned or manifested in public.

The alternative is a situation in which, for example, religious convictions are granted a public hearing in debate; not necessarily one in which they are privileged or regarded as beyond criticism, but one in which they are attended to as representing the considered moral foundation of the

choices and priorities of citizens. This is potentially a noisier and untidier situation than one where everyone agrees what will and will not 'count' as an intervention in public debate; but at least it does not seek to conceal or deny difference. And what makes this more than a free-for-all where the loudest voice wins the right to impose views is the shared recognition of *law*, that system of determining the limits of any individual's or group's freedom which represents the agreement in principle of all groups in a society to renounce violent struggle or assertion because of a basic trust that all voices are being heard in the process of 'brokering' harmony.

The degree to which law will reflect specific views and convictions grounded in religious or ideological belief will vary from one society to another, depending on all sorts of factors – most crucially on whether a group is thought to have persuaded a credible proportion of the population at large that such and such a policy is just or desirable. This needs saying so as to avoid any assumption that there are positions that are *automatically* incapable of being enshrined in law. Thus it is possible in principle to win public arguments about the need to restrict the availability of abortion; and it is possible in principle to win arguments about legalising euthanasia. The fact that the former may reflect the wishes of religious groups and the latter offend and contradict them is a matter of contingency. It is precisely because such decisions always remain open to argument that they can be lived with; in a society where there were rigidly fixed standards of what could rationally or properly be legislated, there would be the danger of such legal decisions becoming effectively irreformable. It would be harder to reopen questions on the basis of shifting moral perceptions. This is indeed a somewhat high-risk position; but if the alternative is a view that absolutizes one and only one sort of public rationality, the risks are higher.

So it is possible to imagine a 'procedurally' secular society and legal system which is always open to being persuaded by confessional or ideological argument on particular issues, but is not committed to privileging permanently any one confessional group. The recent UK debate about legalising assisted dying brought into focus many of these matters in a quite sharp way. Considerations based on religious conviction were certainly in evidence in the debate; but what determined the outcome was neither a purely instrumental and 'secular' set of considerations, nor the unequivocal victory of religious conviction but the convergence of diverse concerns, both pragmatic and principled. It is an interesting model of how, in a working liberal democracy of a 'procedurally' secular kind, there can be interaction and public engagement between varieties of both religious and non-religious argument.

Essentially what I am suggesting is that this alone guarantees the kind of political freedom I am concerned to define and to secure. But what I further want to establish is that, paradoxical as it may seem, such secularism is in fact the outgrowth of a specific *religious* position. The Christian Church began as a reconstructed version of the notion of God's people – a community called by God to make God known to the world in and through the forms of law-governed common life – the 'law' being, in the Christian case, the model of action and suffering revealed in Jesus Christ. It claimed to make real a pattern of common life lived in the fullest possible accord with the nature and will of God; a life in which each member's flourishing depended closely and strictly on the flourishing of every other and in which every specific gift or advantage had to be understood as a gift offered to the common life. This is how the imagery of the Body of Christ works in St Paul's letters. There is no Christian identity in the New Testament that is not grounded in this pattern; this is what the believer is initiated into by baptism. And this is a common life that exists quite independently of any conventional political security. Because it depends on the call and empowering of Christ's Spirit, it cannot be destroyed by change in external circumstances, by the political arrangements prevailing in this or that particular society. So Christian identity is irreducibly political in the sense that it defines a *politeia*, a kind of citizenship (Philippians 3.20); yet its existence and integrity are not bound to a successful realisation of this citizenship within history. There does not have to be a final and sacred political order created in order for the integrity of the Church to survive.

This is the fundamental theme of Augustine's *City of God* and of much of the mediaeval tradition; its roots are in the complex convergence of Jesus' preaching of a 'Kingdom' to which only trust in his message gives access and membership, and Paul's understanding of the reconstituting of the community of Jesus in and by the cross and resurrection and the foundational gift of the Spirit of Jesus. It was the belief that led the first Christians to deny the authority of the Roman Empire to command their *religious* allegiance. In response to challenge and persecution, they sought to clarify the strictly limited loyalty which they believed they owed to government. The tension this created arose through the natural assumption that the rival citizenship defined by the Church was simply in competition with the citizenship that Roman law defined. What was virtually impossible for the Imperial administration to comprehend was the idea that there were graded levels of loyalty: that the level of acceptance of legitimate authority which made you pay taxes or drive your chariot on the right side of the road

was something different from the loyalty that dictated your most fundamental moral options on the basis of convictions about the relationships between the world and humans – in particular to their creator. For practical purposes, most of the time, ordinary legality would be uncontroversial; the disturbing thing was that Christians believed that there were circumstances in which loyalty to God trumped the demands of the *civitas*. The state's power was not the ultimate and sacred sanction.

What complicated this understanding to some extent in the Middle Ages was the steady growth of practices which made the Church's administration look more and more like a rival kind of state, a system not only safeguarding loyalties beyond those owed to a legitimate government but apparently erecting a straightforwardly parallel scheme of social relations. The radical turn of the Lutheran and the English Reformations towards an often uncritical religious sanctioning of state power as exercised by 'godly princes' was in part a reaction against this – bringing its own equally problematic legacy. In all of this theological and political history, however, the most significant point was always the recognition that what the state could properly demand of the citizen was *limited* by relationships and obligations beyond the state's reach; even in the period when Anglicans were most absolute for the rights of the monarch, there was a clear recognition (expressed notably even by Archbishop William Laud preaching to the Court of Charles I) that this could not mean that the state was preserved from falling into error or tyranny, or that the state had an unqualified right over consciences. When the state was in error or malfunction, there remained 'passive obedience': that is, non-violent non-compliance, accepting the legal consequences.

One of the clearest and most interesting statements of the nature of these limitations to the state's legitimate demands comes from an unexpected quarter, in the era of the French Revolution and in the wake of the Enlightenment. In 1793, Carl Theodor von Dalberg, Coadjutor Bishop of Mainz and soon to become Archbishop-Elector of that see, published a treatise *On the True Limits of the State's Action in Relation to its Members*. The state exists because of the need of citizens to labour together for their common welfare, and there is therefore no necessary conflict between individual and state. But since the religious commitments of humankind demonstrate that humanity is not characterised simply by 'interest' (that is by seeking maximal security and prosperity) the state cannot act so as to undermine or deny those aspects of human action and collaboration which express identities and solidarities wider than those of the mutual-

ly beneficial arrangements of any specific state. To quote from Nicholas Boyle's lucid summary in his biography of Dalberg's friend Goethe, the limitations of the state 'lie, not in the duty to respect some supposed non-political aspect of the lives of its citizens, but in duties owed to those who are not its members at all: the state may not command or permit to its citizens any action contrary to their obligations as citizens of the world: there are, that is, rights which all enjoy in virtue of their humanity, and it is a distinguishing feature of Christian states, Dalberg believes, to have recognized such rights. Similarly the state may not command or permit any pointless tormenting or wasteful destruction of the non-human creation, animal, vegetable or mineral'.³

This is a remarkable perspective whose contemporary pertinence will not need spelling out. As Boyle stresses, it is important that Dalberg is not claiming that there is a non-political sphere of human life that has to be left alone by the state: a tolerated 'Indian reservation' of private conviction. He is arguing for the interpenetration of two sorts of political action, we might say: on the one hand the routine business of a law-governed society, on the other the relations and obligations that exists in virtue of something other than pragmatic or self-interested human decisions, the solidarities that do not depend on human organisation. For Dalberg, these are essentially the solidarities of shared relationship to a creator. The state cannot administer what these demand in a simple way; it has a limited and more modest purpose; but neither can it ignore them. We are, in fact, here given a sketch of what I attempted earlier to suggest in terms of the presence of certain sorts of argument and negotiation in the public sphere of a state's legal process, as groups of strong conviction attempt to persuade the state that such and such a proposition would or would not infringe those larger solidarities. Current debates about euthanasia, about ecology or about the freedoms of religious minorities all in different ways carry elements of this kind of questioning.

Dalberg's great-nephew was none other than Lord Acton, though whether the great historian ever made direct use of his kinsman's work I do not know. Quite early in his political and intellectual career, Acton (writing in 1862 to Richard Simpson) asserted that 'liberty has grown out of the distinction (separation is a bad word) of Church and State'.⁴ The mode of expression in this letter might lead us to suppose that he is think-

³ *Goethe: the Poet and the Age* (Oxford, 2000), vol. II, p. 33.

⁴ David Mathew: *Acton: The Formative Years* (London, 1946), p. 170.

ing simply of a liberty of conscience that is basically non-political; but in fact, as his mature writing makes clear, this would be to misread him. He is not advocating a situation where the state conceded certain private rights, but a state that recognises that it is not in fact the grantor of such rights in the first place; a state that recognises that it has come into being to serve the diverse human groupings that now constitute it, that it derives its legitimacy from their co-operation and consent as embodied in constitutional form. As such, the state cannot claim to be the *source* of legitimate behaviour or legitimate modes of association: it has the right from time to time to judge how far particular behaviours and associations adversely affect the coexistence of the communities in its jurisdiction, but not to prescribe in advance that behaviour unlicensed by the state should be publicly invisible or illegitimate. And because the state is always a coalition of groups agreed on a legal structure, it is risky to identify nations and states, let alone races and states. Acton was a good deal ahead of his time in refusing to take nationalism for granted as a natural companion to liberalism.⁵ His defence of federalism as a political principle merits some re-examination at a time when what once seemed the inflexible modern notions of national sovereignty are being tested severely by the globalisation of markets and cultures; but that is perhaps another story.

What emerges from this reading of the Christian contribution to the history of political thought, a reading shaped by both Roman Catholic and Anglican thinkers (Acton's disciple John Neville Figgis being prominent among the latter), is that there is serious case for saying that some aspects of liberal politics would be unthinkable without Christian theology, and that these are the aspects that offer the clearest foundation for a full defence of active political liberty. Faith is the root of freedom and programmatic secularism cannot deliver anything comparable. The Christian presence in the Roman Empire declared that there were solidarities independent of the Empire and therefore capable of surviving political change. Augustine's version of this opened the door to a further refinement, implying that the survival of these 'solidarities' could be a contribution to the reconstruction of political order on the far side of any particular disaster or collapse. And lest that should appear an academic point, it is worth observing that the role of the Church in post-conflict societies in Africa today, dealing with education, the protection of women and chil-

⁵ See Roland Hill: *Lord Acton* (New Haven and London, 2000), pp. 414-6.

dren, and the maintenance of some forms of trustworthy associational life, illustrates with dramatic and poignant clarity exactly what this means. A 'liberal' politics that depended on the maintenance of one unchallengeable form of administration at all costs, as if no credible political life could survive its disappearance, would risk succumbing to illiberal methods to secure its survival. Whenever we hear, as we sometimes do, of the need to limit some historic legal freedom for the sake of countering general threats to our liberty, from crime or terror, we should recognise the reality of the moral dilemmas here; but also be alert to what happens to our concepts of liberty in this process.

The salient point is that a supposedly liberal society which assumes absolutely that it has (as I put it earlier) the resources for producing and sustaining moral motivation independently of the *actual* moral or spiritual commitments of its citizens, is in danger behaving and speaking as if the only kind of human solidarity that really matters is that of the state. Programmatic secularism, as a shorthand for the denial of the public legitimacy of religious commitment as a partner in political conversation, will always carry the seeds, not of totalitarianism in the obvious sense, but of that 'totalising' spirit which stifles critique by silencing the other. Charles Taylor, writing about de Tocqueville,⁶ summarises Tocqueville's concern about a secularised democratic will degenerating 'into a kind of mild despotism (*despotisme doux*) in which citizens fall prey to a tutelary power that dwarfs them; and this is both cause and effect of a turn away from the public to the private which, although tempting, represents a diminution of their human stature'.

Procedural secularism is the acceptance by state authority of a prior and irreducible other or others; it remains *secular*, because as soon as it systematically privileged one group it would ally its legitimacy with the sacred and so destroy its otherness; but it can move into and out of alliance with the perspectives of faith, depending on the varying and unpredictable outcomes of honest social argument, and can collaborate without anxiety with communities of faith in the provision, for example, of education or social regeneration. Further, the critical presence of communities of religious commitment means that it is always possible to challenge accounts of political reasoning that take no account of solidarities beyond those of the state. Dalberg's awareness of citizenship in a transnational community, and

⁶ *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1995), p. 221.

membership within an interdependent created order; offer vivid illustrations of the moral perspectives that state loyalties alone will not secure. And, to move into a slightly different idiom, this poses the very significant question of how 'civil society' is to be understood; the idea that this might have a properly international dimension is in fact more and more compelling in our own day.

There is, of course, one set of issues on the border of what we have so far been discussing which demands to be addressed more directly. At the moment, advocates of programmatic secularism are troubled, if not panicked, by the increasing visibility of Islam in historically Christian and/or liberal societies. But even procedural secularists are often disturbed. Islam, so the argument runs, knows nothing of the 'secularising' element in the history of Christian theology; its political theory asserts the primacy of the *umma*, the transnational community of believers, over every possible political arrangement; but, where Christianity has on the whole settled for ironic distance and the distinction of levels of corporate loyalty, Islam has been understood to assume that it is indeed possible to realise the full political embodiment of revealed law. In other words, it *does* compete for the same space as the state.

In fact, the distinction in modern democracies between the way Muslims belong and the way others belong is by no means as stark as some ideologues might expect. Some Muslim scholars resident in the West, writers like Maleiha Malik or Tariq Ramadan, have discussed ways in which Muslim citizens can engage in good conscience with non-Muslim government and law. Some have observed that Islam recognises law that is *compatible* with Muslim principles as *ipso facto* Islamic law so that the Muslim can acknowledge, enjoy and defend full citizenship in a non-Muslim society. Furthermore, there is already in Islam a tradition of plurality in the interpretation of Islamic law that should make us cautious about assuming that there is one and only one kind of jurisprudence represented by the word *sharia*. And there are also in Islamic history abundant examples of conflict between rulers and religious scholars, government and *ulema*, to the degree that some have spoken of a limited analogy with the Christian tension between Church and state. These are complex historical issues, but there is enough to suggest that we need a nuanced approach to the supposedly monolithic character of Muslim political thought.

That being said, there is one area of abiding difficulty. The Muslim may with a good conscience enjoy citizenship in a non-Muslim society; what exactly does citizenship mean for a non-Muslim in a Muslim society? It is

important not just to cast this question as one of simple 'reciprocity', as if both parties shared exactly the same presuppositions and all that was in question was whether these principles were being fairly applied. But to what extent does the Muslim state, acknowledging in more or less explicit ways the sovereignty of Islamic law, employ a notion of citizenship that also allows for legitimate loyalties outside the community of Muslim believers? Historically, there have been impressive examples of something very like this recognition; but there have also been historic examples of severe civic burdens imposed on non-Muslims. Most disturbingly, there is the tension between the great Quranic insistence that 'there is no compulsion in religion' and the penalties associated with conversion and the pressures around mixed marriages in the practice of many Muslim states.

So one of the questions which Christians will want to pursue in their continuing dialogue with Islam is whether the idea of a 'secular' level of citizenship – with all that this implies about liberties of conscience – is indeed compatible with a basically Islamic commitment in the shape of society at large; whether the Muslim state will distinguish between what is religiously forbidden and what is legally punishable as a violation of the state's order, so that adultery or apostasy, to take the obvious examples, do not have to be regarded as statutory crimes (let alone capital ones). Muslim jurists in several Muslim societies are raising these questions already, with much sophistication and sensitivity, and the dialogue between our communities needs to attend carefully to this debate.

I have devoted some attention to this difficult question partly because of its unquestioned pertinence in many parts of the world, partly because of the somewhat inadequate way in which we sometimes discuss it. Reciprocity is a perfectly sensible notion from our standpoint; but we also need to understand why for some Muslims there seems to be no automatic symmetry between Christian and Muslim tolerance. Unless we are able to argue in ways that engage with the distinctive features of Islamic polity and politics, we are not going to connect or to make any difference. We cannot collude with an interpretation of Islamic political identity whose effects for Christians have sometimes been lethally oppressive; neither can we simply expect that an argument assuming Christian and liberal principles will convince. There is ample work to do in this area.

But in conclusion I want to return to the main lines I have been sketching here, and to make one or two final observations on the sort of 'enlightenment' accounts of freedom, faith and the secular with which I began. The case I have argued (by no means a wholly original one) is that a certain kind

of 'secularism' has direct Christian and theological roots. By this I do not mean that curious infatuation with the idea of a world devoid of the sacred which preoccupied some theologians of the nineteen sixties, but something almost opposite to this: that is, a culture in which presence and solidarities exist which exceed and escape the conventional boundaries of 'public life' but which thus imbue that public life with depth and moral gravity that cannot be generated simply by the negotiation of practical goods and balanced self-interests. To put it more dramatically, I am arguing that the sphere of public and political negotiation flourishes only in the context of larger commitments and visions, and that if this is forgotten or repressed by a supposedly neutral ideology of the public sphere, immense damage is done to the moral energy of a liberal society. For that ideal of liberal society, if it is to be any more than a charter for the carefully brokered competition of individual, requires not a narrowing but a broadening of the moral sources from which the motivation for social action and political self-determination can be drawn.

But there is an underlying question prompted by the remark of Ignatieff on 'inner selves' that I quoted earlier. The liberal, Ignatieff claims, is not concerned with 'hierarchies' of true or false selves. But the danger here is surely that of creating a political discourse in which any notion of a self-aware and self-critical person disappears. There is indeed, deplorably, a kind of appeal to 'liberal' ideals which effectively reduces the human self to an economic unit, a solitary accumulator of rights, comforts and securities. But it is an odd sort of liberalism that so dismisses the significance of a freedom learned by social processes of formation and exercised consciously and intelligently for goals that are not exclusively self-interested.

If the three terms of my title do indeed belong together; if a proper secularism requires faith; if it is to guarantee freedom, this is because a civilised politics must be a politics attuned to the real capacities and dignities of the person – not the individual consumer, but the self, learning over time to exercise liberty in the framework of intelligible communication, and the self-scrutiny that grows from this. Such a concept of the person is, I would maintain, unavoidably religious in character; it assumes that we 'answer' not only to circumstance or instinct or even to each other, but to a Creator who addresses us and engages us before ever we embark on social negotiation. That, after all, is why we regard the child – or the mentally challenged adult, the dying man, or woman who has passed beyond ordinary human communication – as a *person*, whose dig-

nities and liberties are inalienable. The struggle for a right balance of secular process and public religious debate is part of a wider struggle for a concept of the personal that is appropriately robust and able to withstand the pressures of a functionalist and reductionist climate. This is a larger matter than we can explore here; but without this dimension, the liberal ideal becomes deeply anti-humanist. And, like it or not, we need a theology to arrest this degeneration.

Secularism, as defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is the "indifference to, or rejection or exclusion of, religion and religious considerations." In certain context, the word can refer to anticlericalism, atheism, desire to exclude religion from social activities or civic affairs, banishment of religious symbols from the public sphere, state neutrality toward religion, the separation of religion from state, or disestablishment (separation of church and state). Maclure and Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom*, 20: "The democratic state must . . . treat equally citizens who act on religious beliefs and those who do not; it must, in other words, be neutral in relation to the different worldviews and conceptions of the good—secular, spiritual, and religious—with which citizens identify." Faith is the achievement of many generations, an effort accumulated over centuries. Many of its ideas are as the light of the star that left its source a long time ago. Many enigmatic songs, unfathomable today, are the resonance of voices of bygone times. There is a collective memory of God in the human spirit, and it is this memory which is the main source of our faith. From Abraham Heschel's two-part essay "Faith," *The Reconstructionist* 10, Nov. 3 & 17 (1944). *Secularism. Politics, Religion, and Freedom*. Oxford University Press 2017. [New Books in Big Ideas](#) [New Books in Peoples & Places](#) [New Books in Politics](#) [New Books in Politics & Society](#) [New Books in Religion](#) [New Books in Religion & Faith](#) [New Books in Secularism](#) [New Books in World Affairs](#) [New Books Network](#) November 3, 2017 Carrie Lynn Evans. Secularism is an increasingly hot topic in public, political, and religious debate across the globe. It is embodied in the conflict between secular republics—