Article

Can We Move Beyond the Secular State?

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Abstract: The article argues for re-consideration of the secularization so often in the West regarded as an essential condition for a democratic state. Its inbuilt incoherence and problematic consequences suggest that the term secular should be abandoned. Deep-seated reasons for objecting to such a proposal follow, discussing an affront to personal integrity, confronting intellectual apartheid and analysing abuse of religion. A way forward is suggested in learning to accept unavoidable levels of uncertainty, so that generous-minded dialogue can take the place of either/or thinking.

Keywords: secularist; personal integrity; intellectual apartheid; religious reform; accepting uncertainty

1. Introduction

The term *secularism* was first used *ca*. 1850 by G.J. Holyoake to denote a system that seeks to interpret and organize life on principles taken wholly from the world, without recourse to any religious belief [1]. Since then, there has been intense debate concerning the precise meaning of the word *secular* when applied to liberal democratic states in the West. Jose Casanova, for example, has distinguished between three different connotations:

(a)   Secularization as the *decline of religious beliefs and practices* in modern societies.

(b)   Secularization as the *privatization of religion*, often understood both as a general modern historical trend and as a normative condition, indeed as a pre-condition for modern liberal democratic politics.

(c)   Secularization as the *emancipation of the secular spheres* (state, economy, and science) from religious institutions and norms [2].

My concern is with the second of these, as I want to relate to how the word is commonly used in everyday parlance indicating the characteristic division between secular public space and religious private space presumed necessary for a democracy.

Regarding the term *religion*, again I am referring to the most commonly-accepted meaning in everyday usage—and seen most clearly by those who do not agree with it—namely belief in some kind of cosmic order greater than what science alone can unravel. Awareness of some Transcendent Reality, in most religions termed *God*, is what justifies using the same word *religion* to denote the very different and separate forms of organization and practice which *religions* in the plural reveal.

The validity of this secularist approach to democracy tends to be taken for granted in the West today. The assumption is that the public domain must be neutral and that, if it is secularist, it is neutral. This means that religious beliefs must be kept for the private domain. This approach is, however, open to a number of objections.

2. Difficulties Facing the Privatization of Religion

2.1. Incoherences in Insistence on a Secularist Organization of Society

(i) Its claim to *neutrality* may be bogus. It tends to be assumed that not mentioning something makes for neutrality when it can easily lead to reductionism. Not mentioning God in the public domain may constitute practical atheism whether stated or not. It can convey the implication that religion is peripheral to the conduct of human affairs and therefore irrelevant. This is not any less contentious than the various religious views a secularist approach wishes to confine to the private sphere. Thus, built into the use of the term is a commitment to a controversial view of the world. That is not a neutral position. To Talal Asad, for example, the concept of secularism as a neutral and flat space is curious. As a Muslim in the USA after 9/11, he found himself exposed to what he termed "explosions of intolerance" that seemed to him "entirely compatible with secularism in a highly modern society" [3].

(ii) Secularists claim that they are being *inclusive* by insisting on a common language for all in the public square—a language that does not mention the God in whom many do not believe (see e.g., Laborde [4]). Religious people must be bilingual, speaking a secular language in public. Sensible as this may seem, such banishment of God-language constitutes a form of exclusivism. It effectively discriminates against religious people who have to learn this *second language* whilst the non-religious do not, for the default position is effectively atheist. Bhikhu Parekh strongly expresses concern about reasons given in the public realm having to be of a secular nature. In an interview with Julian Baggini, he said: "If you are a religious person who feels profoundly guided by certain absolute commitments, when you enter public life you are going to be drawing inspiration from those fundamental beliefs. If you tell these people: no appeal to God at all. no appeal to anything religious at all, you castrate them. You undermine not only the very basis of their beliefs but the very language in terms of which they think and talk. You are doing them an injustice. You are treating them unequally, because you have certain discursive privileges which you deny them." [5].

(iii)A secularist approach may be considered hypocritical because it offends not only against neutrality and inclusivity but also against several widely-accepted principles supposedly guaranteed by secularization. The claims of *pluralism* argue for including religion, not excluding it. After all, as Jean Behke Elshtain comments: "Telling a Hindu to hide being a Hindu is scarcely a picture of liberal pluralism" [6]. The importance given to *tolerance* likewise implies that religion be not ignored. *Free speech* should be available to all, religious and non-religious alike. *Openness* to enquiry should welcome the contribution of religion to debate and education. In trying to find a *sustainable identity* for a nation, its history and tradition should naturally be understood and respected, instead of masked out of consideration as is frequently the case regarding the role of Christianity in the formation of civilization in the West (see e.g., Hart [7]).

2.2. A Vacuum to Be Filled

The problem is compounded by the fact that it cannot be the case that, if God exists, any religious aspirations are unimportant and should be publicly sidelined. On any showing, religious belief is not just a hobby; it affects all that a person is—how people speak, act and react. Belief cannot be clinically separated from the character of a person.

Moreover, any society has to be focused around a worldview in the sense that principles are adduced for making decisions affecting everyone. Such basic common values and convictions may be implicit or less explicit and shared by different explicit world-views and religions. However, they give an effective community something to rally around. If religion—which in almost every civilization known has provided such a communal ideal—is ruled out, then of necessity something else must take its place. What that view is may be disputed, but nature abhors a vacuum.

If the existence of God or any form of Transcendent Reality is denied, materialism will be the result, whatever particular angle it be viewed from such as scientism, positivism or humanism. Without some belief in Transcendent Reality, matter is all that there ultimately is, and everything becomes explainable in principle in material terms.

Such materialism may be consciously chosen or not. Often it is taken for granted and not articulated. It can therefore appear to be benign and open, unlike religion, which never tires of professing what it believes, to the irritation of those who do not believe it!

Materialism tends, however, to be vague about values, about whether life has any purpose, and what the point of community is. Materialism can easily descend to questioning whether good and evil have any real meaning beyond what people choose. At its lowest level this kind of thinking, or non-thinking, can lead to commercialism, hedonism and a "me first" culture which many today fear as increasingly dominant in the West.

Secularists generally claim to inhabit high moral ground, standing for human rights and a genuine altruism not dependent on any utilitarian desire for heaven or fear of hell. Lofty sentiments can indeed be expressed, as Steven Weinberg recently said in an interview: "There is a nobility in proceeding as if there were a purpose prescribed for us but knowing that there isn't" [8]. However, it may be asked whether, for the running of a democracy in which everyone has a vote, such sentiments are enough. Are they not appropriate only for a fortunate, educated elite?

2.3. The Side-Lining of Religion

Signs that such materialism, chosen or not, has led to the ignoring of religion are plentiful. A recent holiday in India, which happened to include the Easter season, brought home to me just how side-lined religion has become. The sensitive tour-organisers assumed that no one would wish to mark in any way the most important Christian festival of the year. A few of us discovered a village church close by to where we were staying, where on Easter Eve they were holding a 4-h service. We were amazed to find *ca.*1000 people attending in a colourful building wholly Indian in style. Our Indian guide commented afterwards: "Well it's a hang-over from the past—just a cultural thing!"

These attitudes of ignoring or slighting religion are extremely common. Most newspapers carry very little on religion except when it is the cause of public controversy or violence. *The Week*, e.g., is excellent on everything from political and economic comment to sport and exhibitions, but there is no section on religion. Apparently this is an area of human life and activity on which it is not worth commenting. Religion is conspicuous by its absence in a powerful institution like the Royal Society of Arts, of which I am a Fellow, whilst materialism of one kind or another is conspicuous by its *omni*-presence. This is also true of philosophy, where appreciative reference to religion is rare. It is not often that philosophy journals invite competent religious people to contribute to debate on important issues to which reference to religion would be relevant.

Major playwrights such as Tom Stoppard take it for granted that there is no God and that life must find meaning, if it can, without any spiritual dimension. In his most-acclaimed play, *Arcadia,* there is plenty of argument and disagreement expressed, e.g., Enlightenment thinking pitted against the impoverished feelings of pseudo-Romanticism, but it is assumed, that "we die on the march. But there is nothing outside the march", as he puts it—a march that is not going anywhere [9]. There is no spokesman for the validity of holding any religious view; for the Smart Set that is not an option.

2.4. Is the Protest Value of Secularism Needed in the West Today?

Does this secularist victory ensure greater freedom of thought? Is it a recipe for a more sustainable and benevolent society? It is understandable that many see it as such. Reacting against a time when specific religious belief was held to be essential for the holding of public office, secularism meant freedom from such constraints. In this sense, secularism may be regarded as beneficial by everyone, whether religious or not.

Inappropriate religious intervention regarding the nature of the state needs forthright opposition. A theocracy where it is presumed that all must believe in God according to how the ruling clique understand it, with penalties for not toeing the religious line and even total exclusion, does provide appropriate reason for secularist protest. Similarly, if education is in the hands of clerics who prevent free enquiry in the search for knowledge, then secularist protest is justified. Historically, that is how the secularist movement in the West arose at the time of the Enlightenment, as protest against oppressive ecclesiastical control.

The significance of the term secularism is still appropriate in many parts of the world. I consider, however, that it is so no longer in the West. Here the battle has been won; the Christian churches today realistically pose no such conceivable threat to domination or tyranny. In any case, as Jose Casanova

notes, "The rules for protection from the tyranny of religious majorities should be the same democratic rules used to defend from the tyranny of any democratic majority. The protection of the rights of any minority, religious or secular, and equal universal access should be central normative principles of any liberal democratic system. In principle one should not need any additional particular secularist principle or legislation." [2].

Moreover, the ignoring of religion to which it leads entails lack of understanding of religion and inability to make valid judgements concerning it. This is serious because on the world-stage religion is a force that has to be reckoned with; ignorance can become dangerous indeed in the light of terrorist threats. The atrocities in Paris both on the staff of the Charlie Hebdo cartoon paper and in November 2015 illustrate only too well how urgently the West ought to re-think its attitude to religion.

Why is there this insistence on the necessity for secularism, when it carries contentious consequences as outlined above? Is it not time to look again at why democracies should be secular? Has it not become an anachronistic term and outlived its significance, and potentially deadly in its implication that all religion is unhelpful or even bad? Ideally, its use should be discontinued now the protest for which it was once so important ceases to be relevant. To quote Casanova again "I cannot find a compelling reason, on either democratic or liberal grounds, to banish in principle religion from the public democratic sphere….The attempt to establish a wall of separation between 'religion' and 'politics' is both unjustified and probably counter-productive for democracy itself." [2].

However, such a conclusion is likely to be passionately resisted. Why? Is it that the West is still living in the 18th century and re-living a fight that has been won, caught in a time-warp like a perpetual teenager rebelling against parental control? I suspect there are at least three deeper reasons at work.

3. Does the Controversial Nature of Religion Pose a Threat to Personal Integrity?

3.1. The Importance of an Individual's Free Response

Why should the fact that not everyone in a democracy believes in God offer an argument for privatizing religion? Public life is full of controversial debate. Almost everything any politician says is controversial in that some citizens do not agree with it! All academic work similarly involves controversy.

The difficulty, however, is that when fundamental beliefs and values holding a society together are voiced—as they should be, and nurtured—problems can arise if something is assumed to be agreed by all when it is not. To be required to sing the British National Anthem addressed to God when some citizens do not believe in God is dishonest. Thus, keeping religious views out of the public square can be seen as a simple way of protecting personal integrity.

Can it nevertheless be argued, in light of the importance of expressing solidarity with others, that an element of compromise should sometimes be engaged regarding what a person privately thinks? In any organisation or institution to which people commit themselves, there will generally be things with which the individual may disagree. An excellent example is the validity of paying taxes even though the individual may disapprove of much that the money is spent on. Are citizens, however, under a moral obligation, with everyone else whose lives are supported by the state, to contribute to that state unless the state becomes so completely immoral that the individual may be justified in outlawing him/herself, with all the consequences that such a move would involve? Should not singing the

National Anthem by atheists be such an innocuous example of a necessary compromise? It has worked well in the past, helping to create a civilization which could mature into one officially honouring the rights of every person.

A substantial and highly vocal minority, however, who do not believe in God has been able to join forces with the practical atheism of daily life and enquiry in which God is rarely mentioned and appears to be redundant. Furthermore, we should not be encouraging a split personality whereby people say one thing and perhaps mean its opposite. I consider the argument from personal integrity a strong one. The deduction that should be drawn from this is that what should *not* be encouraged in public is assuming the agreement of all when not all agree. Political and academic controversy is deemed acceptable because it is publicly acknowledged that people do hold different, indeed often contradictory, opinions.

There is a real problem with the idea of compromise when it concerns fundamental beliefs and values. In the case of something as important and significant to people as belief or non-belief in God, acknowledgement of levels of disagreement should be voiced.

3.2. The Possibility of a Constructive Response

It is easy to adopt the seemingly simple solution of not mentioning such fundamental beliefs and values, voicing only those that everyone shares. Is this option really open? As already discussed, the omission of any mention of God is a controversial position itself. Religious people are citizens of a democracy just as much as non-religious people. Moreover, it is in the interests of forming a strong community that the commitment of those of a religious persuasion should be included. In view of the strong link historically between belief in God and the development of the West, including democracy, it can be seen as unnecessary to omit reference to God, apart from the need to make clear that some people disagree (see, e.g., Bragg's book on the King James Bible, in which he noted that it has been a wellspring of democracy [10]).

The need for nurture in common beliefs and values for a civilized society, and especially for one that claims to be a democracy, is great, and should be strengthened by inclusion of what can powerfully reinforce those beliefs and values for many people who see their source in God. For example, the VE commemorative service in Britain, broadcast on 7 May 2015, included religious material that was inspirational for many. To have excluded that would have rendered the ceremony much less meaningful for those people.

Given the will and intention it is possible to find ways of being together communally without lack of integrity for people who happen to disagree. Levels of disagreement can be voiced and contained by being acknowledged and respected. In my article "Democracy, religion and secularism", I mentioned four such ways, for example: "The constitution could openly acknowledge the validity of a religious perspective even as not all might hold it. Words such as 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, which many of us see as 'under God'…' could be used." [11]. For the VE commemorative service, the insertion of a paragraph along the following lines could be considered: "A Christian service will follow. Let those without any religious belief reflect on the highest good they know, so that together we may remember this momentous event".

A recent example of imaginative coming-together was quoted by Richard Harries [12]. At the 2013 service in Bristol Cathedral marking the beginning of the legal year, the Muslim High Sheriff asked that passages from the Quran be read, the Bishop agreed and they were read when everyone had been seated but before the Christian service began. The High Sheriff said afterwards that she felt "embraced", and all without alienating anyone, whether Christian or Muslim.

Imagination, empathy and willingness to work towards the common good should be able to create ways for what is important and meaningful to different people to be *publicly* expressed. There appears, however, to be little appetite generally for such initiatives. This prompts the question of what is more deeply at work in our society to prevent such amicable and communally-sensible thinking?

4. A Virtual Intellectual Apartheid

4.1. The Fact/Opinion Divide

A basis for secularism lies in a form of apartheid at work in the intellectual life of the West. It consists of what may be termed: a *fact/opinion divide*. According to this view, facts are regarded as constituting knowledge because they are assumed to be objective, whilst opinions, which include values and beliefs, are not because they are subjective. Steven Weinberg gives a sophisticated example of such thinking: "Science is not simply part of our cultural milieu, the way our music and literature are, but is something that's forced on us by nature—not just scientific knowledge but 'the scientific method'. What we do when we say we are doing science is something we have learnt to do because it is sufficiently well tuned to the nature of the world that it allows us to gain reliable knowledge." [8] The implication is that only empirical methodology leads to what deserves to be called knowledge, by comparison with the arts, which are simply what humans culturally produce.

Assuming that opinion is always unreliable is widespread: "It's only my personal opinion" people say deprecatingly, or "That's only anecdotal evidence", or "He would say that, wouldn't he?" thus presuming that he can have no reasons for his view. A clear example of the fact/opinion divide is the disdain meted out to alternative medicine by those who presume that only clinical trials can give reliable medical knowledge.

This dichotomy is, however, based on an unreal gulf between academic study and the world we live in. To consign to pure conjecture all that the human race, past and present, relies on which does not have the benefit of strict empirical proof would mean that no-one could survive infancy, or if they did, they would have no kind of meaningful human relational life.

Other ways of knowing are used all the time and have to be, and they are not all unreliable. The findings of science are not straightforwardly reliable, either. Medical drugs and procedures, for example, can have side effects that vary because individuals are unique. A process of trial and error is as necessary in orthodox medicine as in alternative medicine, as indeed in the whole of life. To claim that one is rational and the other irrational makes no sense.

4.2. Reason versus Religion

A major outcome of the fact/opinion divide is the widespread notion that reason and religion can have nothing to do with each other. Religion is regarded as subjective and therefore irrational, and as

such cannot form the basis for serious enquiry. In the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo atrocity, Salman Rushdie was widely quoted as describing religion as "a medieval form of unreason" [13]. By contrast, a materialist view of the world is regarded as rational and scientific.

May I take, almost at random, an example of such an understanding of religion based on the fact/opinion divide? In an article entitled "No one can judge whose prophet is kosher", David Aaronovich wrote: "since there can be no consistent or semi-scientific way of evaluating—what shall we call it—rectitude of one religion over another, any discrimination between the claims of one faith and another is arbitrary." He goes on to present his opinion of Christianity: "To the Jews of Palestine, in the era of Tiberius, even a portly Aussie might have seemed more probable than a chap who went round claiming to feed a multitude with a bucketful of carp." [14].

It is perhaps worth putting this remark under the microscope of the rational enquiry which religion is supposed to exclude. It reveals a lack of basic knowledge. Aaronovich seems not to know of the reticence of Jesus with regard to such presumed miracles (see, e.g., Rowan Williams [15]), nor that many Christians doubt such miracles, so that belief in them offers no explanation for the existence of Christianity 2000 years later. A properly rational approach would ask whether such miracles were invented and, if so, why.

Behind the emotional outburst stands the assumption that miracles cannot happen because all talk of God is fantasy, but on what grounds? The existence of God cannot be proved logically or demonstrated scientifically, but why should it be? If God exists God is spirit, responsible for the existence of the material world, not an object to be found within it. Indeed it may be said to be illogical to try to find *scientific* evidence for God: effectively that is to be guilty of a logical fallacy, namely, arguing in a circle.

4.3. The Role of Education

The presence of the fact/opinion divide tends to go unnoticed. A major reason for this may lie in the level of conditioning to which people are exposed through what their official education has prioritized. Its over-emphasis on so-called objective, factual knowledge that can be tested through exams, teaches children that such presumed certainty is all that matters. This discourages them from learning, from an early age, that the world is far more complex and difficult to understand than they have been led to believe. In fact nuanced thinking is required about almost everything, and this is accessed via intuition, imagination, empathy, firm concern for truth and fairness to others, *etc.* These involve personal and emotional ways of knowing which cannot be neatly quantified and tested. Individuals are unique, and the range of what is to be known far exceeds the capacity of any of us to understand and appreciate.

Keith Ward expresses it like this: "Humans are not just value-neutral calculating machines". He adds: "Calculation the careful weighing of evidence is an important part of rationality. But it would be irrational to ignore the inclinations of the heart towards the good which help to make us fully personal beings….Such things cannot be checked by any sort of experiment, because they are only discernible by personal insight and only checkable by personal experience, the quality of which is not testable by any quantitative experiment" [16]. However, even attempts to reform education still rely on the testable quantification emphasis. The cry is mostly for more and better testing to ensure that standards improve, and most people take it for granted that a good school is one that has good examination results.

4.4. The Divided Brain

The dangers of this over-reliance on quantitative achievement have interestingly been voiced from within neuroscience itself. The fact of two hemispheres in the brain might seem to confirm that the fact/opinion divide has a basis in physical reality. However, recent research concerning the two hemispheres suggests that there is something radically wrong with such a divide. Instead the hemispheres are designed to work *together* not against each other. It is not an *either-or* situation but a *both-and*.

In a recent impressively-reviewed book, *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, Iain McGilchrist considers that the development of the West has gone astray. It has allowed the Left Hemisphere (LH) to become dominant over the Right Hemisphere (RH). Reliance on the aggressive grasping control-seeking LH has undercut the prior importance in reality of seeing things whole. Seeking certainty via logic, scientific method and utilitarian effectiveness has called into question the validity of other ways of reaching knowledge through intuition and imagination, empathy and cooperation.

McGilchrist notes that LH preoccupation with reaching definiteness means that "the left hemisphere prefers single meanings". Thus the LH tends to prioritise literal meaning and devalue metaphor. In an important passage, he goes on to note that "metaphoric thinking is fundamental to our understanding of the world. Because it is the only way in which understanding can reach outside the system of signs to life itself. It is what links language to life". Because "only the right hemisphere has the capacity to understand metaphor", the LH misses out on any depth in understanding the problems of using language. For "Metaphor is language's cure for the ills entailed on us by language" [17]. Paul Watzlawick makes a similar point when he distinguishes between analogous and digital communication—and the relation defining the real meaning of the content of a message [18].

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The title of McGilchrist's book refers to a story by Nietzsche of a wise spiritual master who ruled his small kingdom humanely and well, but how when its territory increased he had to train emissaries to send out in his place. One of these—the cleverest and most ambitious vizier whom he trusted most—began to see himself as the master. The master was usurped, the people were duped, the domain became a tyranny and it eventually collapsed in ruins. McGilchrist considers that such a take-over has happened in the West. The holistic RH has become effectively thrown out by the aggressive analytical LH.

This LH hegemony impinges directly on the reason *versus* religion assumption. For religion does not admit of the kind of proof or evidence which LH looks for. In its radical non-appreciation of metaphor it cuts itself off from any hope of understanding religion. However, as McGilchrist notes, metaphor and *mythos* are the way in which we come to any understanding of the world.

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He offers support for the notion that in the absence of religion some form of materialism will ensue. In an important passage he writes: "We need metaphor or *mythos* in order to understand the world. We are not given the option not to choose one, and the myth we choose is important: in the absence of anything better we revert to the metaphor or myth of the machine. But we cannot, I believe, get far in understanding the world, or in deriving values which will help us to live well in it, by likening it to the bike in the garage." He also notes the logical fallacy of arguing in a circle referred to above: "If we assume a purely mechanical universe and take the machine as our model, we will uncover the view that—surprise, surprise—the body, and the brain with it, is a machine." ([17], pp. 97, 441).

McGilchrist considers that the virtual disappearance of religion from public life has contributed to the over-dominance of the LH. However, religions themselves must carry some of the blame for this; they are not just victims but perpetrators. Features of religion reflecting such domination of the LH include: over-verbalisation and literalism, close attachment to external behaviour, presumed dogmatic certainty, strongly hierarchical authoritarian control features and an exclusiveness which is concerned to root out heresy.

5. The Need for Religious Reform

Fear of the abuse of religion provides a third reason for the insistence on the privatization of religion. Such wariness of the power of religion has historical roots in the communal remembrance of former oppression. As Elshtain noted, "Often the Spanish Inquisition is trotted out in argument as if this were a serious historic possibility in 21st century Western societies". Moreover, "restrictions on free access derive from the suspicion that religious intolerance is more to be feared than anything else and that such intolerance is to be found lurking in the interstices of even the most benign forms of religious expression."

In the light of the global fear of the terrorism caused by ISIS it may seem dangerously easy for many to think that such wholesale suspicion of religion is justified. However, such evils relate to the abuse of religion not to its inherent substance. Criminality is able to invade any ideology; there is nothing specifically religious about it. Elshtain pointed out that "even were one to do something as unseemly as a body count of victims, antireligious ideologies of the 20th century would win that contest hands down." ([6], p.129).

This does not alter the urgent need for all religions to seek reform, even as moderate Muslims currently have the responsibility to seek to cut off the false support from Islam that ISIS terrorists claim.

The abuse of religion is closely linked with the impact of the three aspects of LH hegemony mentioned above.

5.1. Literalism

In the interpretation of scripture this has been a major scourge. The actual words and literal meaning of texts have been so focussed upon as aids to devotion that, probably mostly unwittingly, they have tended to become engraved in stone. The enormous problems of interpretation become forgotten.

Sayings and events which originated in one context and were written down in another context, often in another language, become fixed in a meaning for people often blissfully unaware of the role of context.

Moreover, because words are always no more than signs pointing towards a reality beyond them, their meaning will always be, apart from the most ordinary and empirical use of language, slippery and dependent on subjective factors. To fail to appreciate the metaphoric meanings contained in words, mistaking them for something literal, is likely to cause people to go far astray.

There is abundant evidence suggesting that this has happened within religions. Almost all the internal controversies that bedevil them concern presumed literal meanings. The scourge of anti-Semitism within Christianity was under-girded by such literalism in interpreting texts like Matthew 27:24f. Similarly the Islamist threat is dangerously supported by adherence to the literal meaning of certain texts in the Quran.

5.2. The Power of Externalism

The longevity of religions, their cohesive power in binding communities together and the strength of emotions that gather around the external practices of a religion combine to encourage a form of idolatry. Religious people can become so attached to particular rituals and creeds that they start giving them the worship intended for God. Forms of idolatry creep in unawares. They can begin to think that God can only be approached by these means, performing these rituals, reciting these creeds, belonging to these communities, obeying these religious leaders. However, if God is Spirit, God is not and cannot be confined to such particularities.

It is crucial to be able to distinguish between the outward external accoutrements of religion and its inner core—what the external practices are supposed to be serving. Eric Abbott advised "Always distinguish between God and religion, for God is transcendent and *beyond religion.*" [19]. However, this is what so easily becomes obscure, even and especially for the most devout, because of sheer habit and repetition.

5.3. Dogmatic Certainty

A major source of the most serious abuse of religion has been the presumption of a dogmatic certainty that equates "my/our" understanding of God with the Will of God. It is crucial to be aware of the fragility and vulnerability to mistakes and misunderstandings, which beset all claims to knowledge. Lack of awareness of the inscrutability of God has proved lethal when religious leaders come to think that they are God's spokesmen. Not all have been like St. Augustine who was reticent at being regarded as an authority; rather, he constantly drew attention to the unavoidability of mystery. Allan Fitzgerald, in an illuminating article commented: "By naming the mystery, Augustine made it clear that he was not a kind of dogmatist nor a sceptic. Rather, he wanted others to know the value of searching—even when there would be no conclusion to that effort." [20].

We need to realize that that in religion we are dealing with "a reality alarmingly beyond human expectation and human capacity", to quote Rowan Williams. He considers that herein lies the basic fantasy from which we all need liberating: "that God's power is just like ours, only in a hugely inflated version". His exposition of the Christian doctrine of the Atonement goes on to note "it also uproots the corresponding notion that whatever power we attain must be valued and clung to at all costs because it

is power endorsed by God." ([15], pp. viii, 62f). He sees the meaning of the Cross of Christ in terms of a challenge to all human-beings continuously to re-think their understanding of God.

6. Conclusions: Seeking Truth Whilst Acknowledging Uncertainty

A democracy needs to protect personal integrity, overcome any unhealthy apartheid and guard against the abuse of religion. In order to achieve these goals, is it essential to insist that society be "secular" in the sense of privatizing religion? Is there anything that can bring secularists and religious people together without the need for such a divisive approach?

Acknowledgement by all of the unavoidable partiality and provisionality of all claims to knowledge could transform the situation. We need to realize that we can only be absolutely certain of the most trivial and mundane matters; that all higher achievements and aspirations of humans cannot attain that degree of certainty. As Keith Ward puts it, "there are unsettleable questions and good evidence does not have to be universally compelling" ([16], p. 64). By accepting this, LH and RH can work together towards the good of the whole instead of being side-tracked by an irrational infatuation with trying to achieve absolute certainty and the control that goes with it—a prime characteristic of LH thinking.

McGilchrist's book itself bears witness to the effective discounting of religion, in that the encyclopaedic knowledge displayed in its 500 pages hardly mentions religion. He nevertheless slips in this sentence about the role of Christianity in the West. "The 2000-year old Western tradition that of Christianity, provides, whether we believe in it or not, an exceptionally rich *mythos*—a term I use in its technical sense, making no judgement here of its truth or otherwise—for understanding the world and our relationship with it." ([17], p. 441).

Is there a touch of wistfulness here? There is certainly an attitude of respect towards religion, not outright rejection or dismissal. It is likely that he himself is agnostic or atheist, but by voicing his own non-judgmentalism, he makes possible space for religion and secularism to cohere. For the fundamental difference in assumptions which each of these presumed protagonists makes about the nature of the world, "cannot be theoretically resolved", as Ward notes. It reveals a fundamental gulf between diverse ways of seeing human experience and human knowledge of reality. There is no neutrally-available evidence that will bridge that gulf ([16], p. 18).

What *can* be accepted is the unavoidability of this gulf so that people whose views differ may respect each other. Acceptance of this can enable religion to learn its proper role of humility, reticence and service. This would help to ensure the visibility of a truly benevolent form of religion, which even those who do not believe in God can respect, and perhaps even admire. Similarly, agnostics and atheists may be able to learn to accept that they have no grounds, rational or otherwise, for simply dismissing religion. They could thus be prepared to admit religious views as potential insights into the public deliberations of truly democratic societies.

Disagreements will always occur. It is the purpose of a democracy to contain disagreement within a communally-benevolent structure. All citizens, religious or not, should value the search for truth, justice and beauty and learn the qualities of honesty, empathy and intuition by which such a search must be conducted. Commitment to *both*/*and* thinking instead of a damaging *either*/*or* mode can build up a spirit of genuine community without effectively marginalizing some.

We need to move forward to an era when democracy is characterized as truly inclusive; when generous-minded dialogue between deeply-felt different convictions enables peaceful co-existence. As Habermas puts it: "Both religious and secular mentalities must be open to a complementary learning process if we are to balance shared citizenship and cultural difference." [21].

I would like to invite discussion of the central ideas in this article.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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