

Religion and Public Debate in a Liberal Society: Always Oil and Water or Sometimes More Like Rum and Coca-Cola?

MAIMON SCHWARZSCHILD*

In the history of ideas, there is an association of religion with superstition, fanaticism, intolerance, reaction, and, in short, illiberalism. This association goes far towards explaining the commonplace liberal impulse to exclude religion as a force in civil life. Liberals often go well beyond advocating institutional separation of church and state. Modern liberal thinkers like Ackerman, Dworkin, Nagel, and — in a somewhat more qualified way -- Greenawalt all say that religious arguments ought not even to influence public policy. In the world of practical politics, the French Revolutionaries expressed something of the same thought when they proposed strangling the last aristocrat with the entrails of the last priest. Echoes of that Revolutionary tradition reverberate in the surviving Communist countries and even in Mexico, where priests could not until recently vote in general elections and are forbidden by law from appearing in public in clerical dress. (When the Pope visited Mexico in the mid-1980s, the President of Mexico shocked the traditionalists of his Institutional Revolutionary Party by going to the airport to greet the Pontiff — taking care, all the same, to insist that he went purely in a private capacity.)

Liberalism does not, of course, spring from an intellectual or historical vacuum. Political liberalism is an heir of the European Enlightenment. Liberalism's core values are drawn directly from the strand of Enlightenment thinking that advocated individual freedom,

* Professor of Law, University of San Diego; barrister of Lincoln's Inn, London.

a society of contract rather than of status, and public tolerance for a broad range of private choices.

In its time, the Enlightenment was first and foremost an adversary to orthodox religion. Although Enlightenment thinkers differed among themselves on many points, including the existence and character of God, it is fair to say that the Enlightenment as a whole beheld religion with something approaching horror. And most of the Enlightenment *philosophes* certainly viewed orthodox religion as deeply antagonistic to any possible liberal program.¹ There were good reasons for the Enlightenment's stance in the context of early modern Europe. But the reasons seem to me to have been contingent, rooted in European history, and driven — at least to some extent — by the peculiarities of the Christian religion. If so, then religion may be uniquely inimical to liberalism at some times and in some places but not in others. In fact, the Enlightenment stance towards religion seems to me largely an anachronism in developed countries today, and to that extent provides a quaint guide to the ethics of public debate in a modern liberal society.

I. WHY WAS RELIGION THE *BÊTE NOIRE* OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT?

In the eyes of the Enlightenment, religion represented everything unenlightened: the dark ages, dogma, feudalism, ignorance, intolerance, inquisition, the Pit and the Pendulum, papal pretensions and papal corruption, Spanish cruelties in the Americas and at home, the suppression of scientific method, the thwarting of Galileo and the burning of Bruno, status rather than contract, economic stagnation, intellectual stagnation, moral stagnation, Gothic ugliness.

This polemic against religion might nowadays seem harsh, yet many of its particulars did, after all, have a basis in reality. At its

1. For an excellent overview of Enlightenment thought, see PETER GAY, *THE ENLIGHTENMENT: AN INTERPRETATION — THE RISE OF MODERN PAGANISM* (1966), including a thorough annotated bibliography of primary and secondary sources, *id.* at 423-555.

Throughout this Article, I generalise about the Enlightenment. There were, of course, numerous Enlightenment thinkers and writers; often, they differed sharply amongst themselves. Nonetheless, they tended to hold in common the ideas, themes, and preoccupations I attribute to them. See *generally* the primary sources cited by Gay at 553-555.

It has to be acknowledged, in this connection, that liberalism itself is by no means the Enlightenment's only legacy. See J.L. TALMON, *THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIAN DEMOCRACY* (4th ed. 1968), for a systematic and very persuasive argument that both liberal democracy and totalitarian messianism are equally the products of eighteenth century Enlightenment ideas. See also ARTHUR HERTZBERG, *THE FRENCH ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE JEWS* (1968) for a clear demonstration that modern, secular anti-semitism — an important ingredient in many forms of illiberalism — took shape within the Enlightenment, not as a reaction against it.

height, the Enlightenment was a phenomenon of the eighteenth century, and the truly devastating sixteenth and seventeenth century wars of religion — the Thirty Years' War on the Continent, and the English Civil War — were historically fresh in the memory of every European. Thus, the Enlightenment associated religion in the most direct possible way with death, destruction, and misery.² Perhaps most importantly, the churches that confronted the Enlightenment were monolithic, or at least had serious pretensions to being so: the famous phrase "*cuius regio, eius religio*," which epitomized the Peace of Westphalia and its settlement of the wars of religion, expressed the reality that within each European kingdom or princely jurisdiction there was one and only one Established church (either Roman Catholic or Protestant), allowing for no religious pluralism in principle, and in practice often affording little tolerance, or none at all, to religious dissenters.

Yet religion in the age of Enlightenment, while in principle monolithic and intolerant, was also temptingly vulnerable. The Reformation and Counter-Reformation represented the crack-up of Western Christendom. For many thoughtful Europeans, the possibility of unquestioning faith, mediaeval-style, was an early casualty of the furious polemics between (and among) Catholics and the various flavours of Protestants. Thus, for an Enlightenment critic and free-thinker, religion was surely an easier target than were the rising absolutist nation-states, many of whose rulers were generous (if condescending) patrons and hosts to the Enlightenment *philosophes*.

II. HOW MIGHT THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION HAVE AROUSED PARTICULAR ANTIPATHY FROM THE ENLIGHTENMENT?

The Enlightenment thinkers were men of secular temperament, and the Christian religion has always had an oddly uneasy relationship to the secular world and its values. Although Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, it never fully merged with the temporal power, and always preserved something of its early conviction that its Kingdom was not of this world. Christianity did perpetuate pagan civilization to some extent, by partially appropriating it: adopting and adapting the administrative structure of the Roman Empire, for example, and using

2. For an assessment of the vast destructive effects of the seventeenth century wars, see M.S. ANDERSON, *WAR AND SOCIETY IN EUROPE OF THE OLD REGIME 1618-1789*, 63-76 (1988); see also JOSEF V. POLISENSKY, *THE THIRTY YEARS WAR* (Robert Evans trans., 1971).

the Greek and Latin languages. Yet Christianity certainly never embraced unconditionally the arts, crafts, values, or thought of the classical civilizations. On the contrary, it was very characteristic of Christianity to insist on a distinction between the sacred and the profane, with a tendency to relegate everything worldly and sensuous to the realm of the profane. Hence Christianity bequeathed to Europeans an ambiguous dual heritage of churchly religion on the one hand and worldly civilization — always associated with ancient paganism — on the other.

Down through the mediaeval centuries, pagan antiquity continued to represent for Europeans the prime source for secular philosophy (in the person of Aristotle above all), science (Archimedes, Euclid), medicine (Galen), art (Graeco-Roman naturalism and perspective), architecture (the classical orders, which the middle ages adapted or distorted but never completely forgot), statecraft, and law. The Church pronounced damnation on most or all of the pagan originators of these arts and sciences. But more important, the Church tended to view these very fields of interest as secular: unreligious, even if not irreligious. The interests persisted, of course, sometimes with the Church's encouragement, but they were not really incorporated into Christianity: they occupied a separate sphere, divorced from the sacred.

There were at least two relevant consequences of all this. First, by excluding many "secular" interests from the religious sphere, the Church was able to achieve (or at least to aspire towards and to approximate) a greater uniformity in belief, and even in outlook and style, than would otherwise have been possible. In practice, the Church embraced a considerable variety of human types with quite varying religious preoccupations. But by demarcating separate religious and secular spheres, the Church excluded many preoccupations — and thus, inevitably, many human temperaments — from the religious category altogether. Hence, within the Church, there was less need for pluralism or even for tolerance than might otherwise have been the case.

Second, the classical arts and sciences, by virtue of their separation from religion, came to represent an implicit alternative to Christianity, a competing value system.³ To be sure, many individuals who were drawn to these arts and sciences through the centuries were

3. Isaiah Berlin identifies Machiavelli as the first to make it clear that the classical and Christian world views were contradictory and irreconcilable. For Berlin, Machiavelli's importance is thus to anticipate the possibility of pluralism, the idea that there are valid yet incompatible ideals which cannot be subsumed by any single Good. See ISAIAH BERLIN, *The Originality of Machiavelli*, in *AGAINST THE CURRENT: ESSAYS IN THE HISTORY OF IDEAS* 25 (1980).

faithful Christians. But for many others, certainly from the Renaissance onwards, orthodox Christianity was almost beside the point. The ethic which the arts and sciences fostered — especially in the case of the sciences — included a degree of open-mindedness, receptivity to evidence, and, hence, tolerance. There was little reason to associate this ethic with Christianity. On the contrary, the idea of tolerance was typically linked in the minds of Europeans to the memory (or mis-memory) of pagan geniality and syncretism in the ancient world. Thus, the groundwork was laid for the Enlightenment thinkers, whose intense identification with ancient Greece and Rome elided fairly smoothly into actual hostility to religion.

III. MIGHT OTHER RELIGIONS HAVE BEEN LESS WELL SUITED AS FOILS FOR THE ENLIGHTENMENT?

Christianity is not the world's only religion, nor Christendom its only religious civilization. Among the world's religions, Islam and Judaism spring to mind for purposes of comparison. Both Islam and Judaism hold themselves out as integrated civilizations, not merely as religions. In neither is the cleavage between sacred and secular so stark as in Christianity. Neither is associated with the ghost of a forerunner pagan civilization, with which secular values might be identified.⁴

Accordingly, both in classical Islam and in Judaism, reason, statecraft, law, even medicine and science are accepted in principle as part of the religious culture. Mediaeval Islam recognized not only clerics and mystics but also caliphs, conquerors, legalists, poets, philosophers, and travellers as "religious" figures. As for Judaism, from the very beginning the Hebrew Bible intertwined the personal histories of the founders of Israel, the national and military history of the people, civil and ritual commandments, and priestly and prophetic texts. The Talmud is even more all-embracing, and mediaeval Judaism accommodated a spectrum that ran from the Kabbalists to the rationalist Maimonides, for whom reason and science and Judaism were all essentially a single enterprise.⁵

4. The writings of Professor Bernard Lewis provide an accessible overview of Islamic civilization. See, e.g., BERNARD LEWIS, *THE ARABS IN HISTORY* (1967), or — more extensively — *THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF ISLAM* (P.M. Holt et al. eds., 1970).

5. For a survey of mediaeval Jewish thought, see JULIUS GUTTMANN, *PHILOSOPHIES OF JUDAISM: THE HISTORY OF JEWISH PHILOSOPHY FROM BIBLICAL TIMES TO FRANZ ROSENZWEIG* 47-265 (1964). For two good recent studies of Maimonides in particular, see MENACHEM KELLNER, *MAIMONIDES ON JUDAISM AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE* (1991), and KENNETH SEESKIN, *MAIMONIDES: A GUIDE FOR TODAY'S PERPLEXED*

Islam and Judaism thus embraced a very wide range of interests, values, and human temperaments, including many whose analogues in Christendom were associated with the classical heritage rather than with the Christian religious one. Islam and Judaism had to do this, given their religious claim to jurisdiction over all of life, not merely over a spiritual segment of it. By including more — in principle, everything — within the religious realm, these faiths were compelled to a degree of pluralism, recognizing quite widely divergent styles of thinking, including rationalist and even scientific styles, as legitimately “religious.”

This can be illustrated concretely. In the history of Christianity, the early Church defined itself in a series of Councils that took place during generally the same time period that the Talmud coalesced as the foundation of Judaism. The differences are revealing. The Church Fathers were intent on formulating a narrow orthodoxy, from which any deviation would be anathema. The “battle of the *i*” was perhaps the most notorious episode, in which it was finally decided that the trinity of Persons in the Christian Godhead were *homo-ousian* (of the same essence, or “consubstantial”), and hence that it was damnable to believe them *homo-iousian* (of merely similar rather than identical substance).⁶ In fact, defining and excommunicating heretics — Arian, Donatist, Nestorian, monophysite, monothelite, etc. — formed a large part of the early history of the Church.⁷ The Athanasian Creed (still canonical, at least in the Anglican Communion) opens with a characteristic warning: “Who-soever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholick Faith/Which Faith [the Creed goes on to define it in detail] except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.”⁸

The Talmud, by contrast, is remarkable for its inclusiveness. It is inclusive in the literal sense that it is made up of many different elements: law primarily, but also stories, homilies, bits of lore, even mathematical calculations. As a legal text, it is inclusive in the sense that it is not so much a code of law as a record of legal discussions and disagreements. The Talmudic rabbis argue over almost every proposition of law, either disagreeing about what the law is, or at least challenging the scope of the law and the sources of authority

(1991).

6. This dispute, along with many other theological disputes in the early Church, is recounted with feline contempt in EDWARD GIBBON, I THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE 671-726 (Modern Library ed., undated).

7. For selections from the original sources of these early Christian controversies, see JOSEPH C. AYER, A SOURCE BOOK FOR ANCIENT CHURCH HISTORY (1970). For a modern history of the early Church in one (large) volume, free of Gibbon’s Enlightenment prejudices (and his genius), see W.H.C. FREND, THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY (1984).

8. THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 27.

for it. On many points of law, the Talmud records a majority view and one or more dissenting views. Often, after a lengthy and complicated legal dispute, having looked at the point from all possible angles, the Talmud states no conclusion at all and does not indicate what the law actually is. Thus, the Talmud scarcely implies that for every question there is a single, right answer; still less does it imply that believers in "wrong" answers are not to be tolerated. For practical legal purposes, the view of the majority usually prevails, but the Talmud insists that its discussions as a whole are part of the Torah, with the diverging views of all the sages thus partaking of divine authority. As the Talmud says of the running controversy between the Schools of Hillel and Shammai, "[the words of] both are the words of the living God."⁹

None of this is to suggest that Judaism (much less Islam, nowadays) is a liberal utopia. There have always been counter-tendencies within Judaism and Islam against pluralism and rationalism, sometimes very strong counter-tendencies indeed.¹⁰ Few cultures in the world, in fact, seem immune to conformity, narrow-mindedness, and outbreaks of fanaticism. Still, Judaism and Islam are at least decentralized: they lack the hierarchy (with a professional stake in defining what is orthodox and what is heretical) and the administrative penchant for uniformity that Christianity, perhaps, inherited from Imperial Rome.

What I am suggesting, then, is that religions like Judaism and classical Islam might be *less* antithetical to pluralism, tolerance, rationalism, and the scientific method than the Enlightenment thinkers found Christianity to be.

9. BABYLONIAN TALMUD, *Eruvin* 13b. See also MISHNAH, *Avot* ("Ethics of the Fathers") 5:17 ("Any controversy that is for the sake of Heaven shall stand legitimate. . . What sort of controversy is for the sake of Heaven? Such is the controversy of Hillel and Shammai.").

See generally Marc Angel, *Authority and Dissent: A Discussion of Boundaries*, 25 TRADITION no. 2, at 18 (1990). Rabbi Angel, a prominent Orthodox Rabbi, cites an abundant Hebrew literature on intellectual freedom in the Jewish tradition, and argues that dissent within the boundaries of normative Judaism is respected and even encouraged: "differences of opinion among our sages constitute the glory of the Torah." See also Jeffrey I. Roth, *The Justification for Controversy under Jewish Law*, 76 CAL. L. REV. 338 (1988).

10. See, e.g., JOSÉ FAUR, *IN THE SHADOW OF HISTORY: JEWS AND Conversos at the Dawn of Modernity* 9-27 (1992). Professor Faur documents an antirationalist wave among Jews in mediaeval Spain, typified by the "banning" of Maimonides by the Jewish community of Barcelona in 1305. Faur links the growing bad feeling between Jews and Gentiles — culminating in the Expulsion of the Jews in 1492 — to the lowering of intellectual and moral values among Spanish Jews as a result of anti-Maimonideanism.

Paradoxically, Christianity may actually have encouraged an antireligious Enlightenment, and hence the development of secular modernity, by its segregation of sacred and secular, its historic disposition to treat differences as heresies, and its unwillingness or inability to embrace the values or even the personality types of the sort of people who therefore gravitated to the Enlightenment. Islamic society, by contrast, had its early — in many ways quite pluralist — flowering, but then in recent centuries settled into general stagnation; it never had an Enlightenment, and now seems to be having enormous trouble accommodating the social and political fruits of Christendom's Enlightenment.¹¹

As for the Jews, there was an influential Jewish Enlightenment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it illustrates how contingent and peculiar to Christian conditions was the implacable hostility of the (gentile) Enlightenment to the Church. The Jewish Enlightenment was animated by many of the same values and aspirations as its gentile counterpart: individual freedom of conscience, scientific method, careers open to talent.¹² But it never broke with the Jewish religion in the way that the gentile Enlightenment broke with Christianity. In particular, it would have been quite alien to the Jewish Enlightenment to suggest that Judaism should have no influence on the public life of the Jewish people. If the key figure in the European Enlightenment was Voltaire, whose attitude to religion was "*écrasez l'infâme*," the key figure in the Jewish Enlightenment was Moses Mendelssohn, a professing Jew, whose admirers associated him with the other great "Moses" figures of Jewish religious history, the Biblical Moses and Moses Maimonides.¹³

IV. RELIGION AND LIBERALISM TODAY

The eighteenth century Enlightenment view of orthodox religion is understandable, given the history of Europe in the foregoing centuries, given some of the salient characteristics of the Christian religion, and given that the Churches still exercised considerable

11. For a history of the Muslim world's encounter with Western Europe, see BERNARD LEWIS, *THE MUSLIM DISCOVERY OF EUROPE* (1982). On the same theme, see also Bernard Lewis, *Muslims, Christians, and Jews: The Dream of Coexistence*, NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, Mar. 26, 1992, at 48.

12. There are good historical essays on the Jewish Enlightenment in *TOWARD MODERNITY: THE EUROPEAN JEWISH MODEL* (Jacob Katz ed., 1987), and in *FRANCES MALINO & DAVID SORKIN, FROM EAST AND WEST: JEWS IN A CHANGING EUROPE 1750-1870* (1990).

13. See *MOSES MENDELSSOHN: SELECTIONS FROM HIS WRITINGS* (Eva Jospe ed. & trans., 1975). On the attitudes of Mendelssohn's admirers, see Lehmann, *Maimonides, Mendelssohn and the Me'asfim: Philosophy and the Biographical Imagination in the Early Haskalah*, 20 LEO BAECK INSTITUTE YEARBOOK 101-103 (1975).

monopoly power at the time. Most of the Enlightenment thinkers viewed religion as a threat to freedom, to pluralism, and to reason — perhaps the most formidable threat they could imagine. Do religious thinking, and religious arguments, pose a comparable threat to modern liberal institutions? Are religious arguments so incompatible with the spirit of liberalism today that they, perhaps alone of all types of arguments, ought to be disqualified from swaying public debates?

Religion seems an odd choice as prime threat to liberalism at the end of a century that has been so greatly dominated by struggles over Communism, fascism, and extreme nationalism. The oddity is compounded by the irony that each of these latter doctrines and movements, like liberalism itself, has roots in the Enlightenment. This is clearest in the case of Marxist Communism, which claimed the mantles of science, of opposition to privilege, of being the party of humanity — all quite consciously by way of claiming the Enlightenment mantle. Fascism and nationalism have a more equivocal link to the Enlightenment, but fascism certainly traces some of its intellectual ancestry to Rousseau's "*volonté générale*," and to the systematic anti-semitism of Voltaire and many of the *philosophes*; messianic nationalism was foreshadowed in Montesquieu's ideas about different peoples needing different constitutions, as well as in the general Enlightenment hostility to the universalism associated with the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁴

For most of the twentieth century, at least outside the Islamic world, illiberal politics have overwhelmingly been Communist politics, or the politics of essentially secular forms of fascism, nationalism, or Third World socialism: the politics, one might say, of the Enlightenment's illegitimate heirs, liberalism's bastard siblings.¹⁵ These movements, in our time, loosed the demons that the Enlightenment was supposed to exorcise: dogma, intolerance, mass enthusiasm, and total war.

It is often said that such movements are really godless religions. The metaphor is attractive. Communism and Nazism certainly had their holy books, their saints, their hymns and sacred symbols, their

14. See TALMON and HERTZBERG, *supra* note 1.

15. This formulation, of course, gives the Enlightenment the benefit of the doubt. Professors Talmon and Hertzberg, *supra* note 1, would take a bleaker view, namely that modern illiberal politics are no less the legitimate heirs of the Enlightenment than liberalism itself.

dogmas and messianic promises, their heretics, their armed inquisitions, their saved and their damned; they provoked their wars of religion, as well as producing a truly unprecedented toll in ruined lives and scores of millions of deaths. They monopolized the societies they dominated: they brooked no public opposition, and recognizing no distinction between public and private, they were able to suppress if not to eradicate private dissent as well.

In liberal societies, indeed, the case is sometimes made that the viewpoints of these movements, or even viewpoints with roots in such movements, should be excluded from public debate. Thus, the German Constitution prohibits Nazi organizations. Nazi speeches and even symbols are absolutely prohibited under German law.¹⁶ Communism in America was treated similarly for some years towards the end of Stalin's regime and immediately thereafter.¹⁷

In some situations, such measures may actually be liberalism's only hope. We might wish that Nazi street demonstrations had been forbidden and Nazi speakers excluded from the democratic politics of Weimar Germany. Even today, we might not lose much sleep over the taboo on Nazi language and imagery in contemporary Germany. Yet the analogous effort during the late 1940s and 1950s to eradicate Communism from American life would probably find few defenders nowadays even if its eponymous leading figure had been someone other than the lamentable, unlamented Senator McCarthy.

This is really the perennial problem for liberalism: how to afford tolerance, which, after all, is the essence of liberalism, to a wide variety of different views of the Good, while not tolerating illiberal ideas, which, if granted toleration, would proceed to devour liberalism. The problem is by no means provoked only by religion. Indeed, the problem might take on the dimensions of a general paradox if liberalism itself turns out to have no view of the Good, other than that various views of the Good ought to be tolerated, and if any substantive view of the Good, at least whenever it actually prevails, is in its nature coercive of alternate, contradictory views. This is especially true if liberalism is deemed to frown upon coerced compliance, say, with majority views of morality, and not merely to

16. See Basic Law (*i.e.*, the Constitution) of the Federal Republic of Germany, Article 21 (2) ("Parties which, by reason of their aims or the behaviour of their adherents, seek to impair or abolish the free democratic basic order or to endanger the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany, shall be unconstitutional"). See also PENAL CODE OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY, Title III §§ 84-86 (Joseph J. Darby trans., 1987) (keeping, distributing, or publicly using flags, insignia, uniforms, slogans, or forms of greeting of "a former National Socialist organisation" shall be punished by up to three years' imprisonment or fine).

17. See, *e.g.*, the Smith Act of 1940, upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Dennis v. United States*, 341 U.S. 494 (1951), later limited as to when it could constitutionally be invoked, in *Yates v. United States*, 354 U.S. 298 (1957).

forbid restrictions on dissenting free speech.

It is no use suggesting that only religions, or ideas analogous to religions, ought to be excluded from public debate, because almost any idea of the Good — certainly any systematic body of principles — can be analogized to religion, just as Marxism and fascism often have been. Liberalism itself is sometimes accused of being a religion, as is the “religion” of secular humanism. At the extreme, one could imagine a bizarre, nightmarish liberalism so intent on tolerance that it tolerates nothing at all, lest any idea should prevail and (then inevitably) coerce compliance from the holders of contradictory ideas.¹⁸

Perhaps the key, at least to some of these problems, lies with the idea of pluralism. The churches in the Age of Enlightenment were still a monopoly power. Europe was homogeneously Christian — excepting only a few Jewish communities, persecuted and despised, and a handful of freethinkers. Established churches could, and did, command general obedience. They could, and did, outlaw rival faiths, and suppress ideas that they viewed as heretical, sceptical, or even simply distasteful. The *philosophes* were quite right that their societies would never be liberal until religion’s sway over public life was sharply reduced.

The situation in the developed countries today is very different. Whatever the rate of church-going — it is quite high in the United States, lower in Canada, much lower in western Europe — we live in societies that are essentially secular. We are sometimes described as consumer societies, sometimes as materialist societies, but no one seriously suggests that we are living in an Age of Faith. George Orwell said of religion that there must have come a moment, silently and irreversibly, perhaps as early as in the late nineteenth century, when the “Noes” had it: when a majority of people no longer believed in the crucial tenets of their ancestral religions, or at least no longer believed in them in the way that they believed, say, in the existence of Australia.

Far from being in a position to squelch pluralism, religion today is itself a riot of pluralism. The 1992 Statistical Abstract of the United

18. Professor Talmon suggested that something like this dynamic is actually at work in what he called “totalitarian democracy”, see *supra* note 1. Starting from the premise that freedom is the supreme virtue, said Talmon, the totalitarian messianist reasons that persons who are “truly free” will act in accordance with a single model of collective virtue, and that it is only right and proper to force people to be “free.” “Political correctness” in American academic circles may be driven by an analogous dynamic. See DINESH D’SOUZA, *ILLIBERAL EDUCATION: THE POLITICS OF RACE AND SEX ON CAMPUS* (1991).

States lists 80 religious bodies with more than 50,000 adherents, and this is a skeletal list: Jews, for example, are one entry — there is no indication that they are religiously divided and denominationalized.¹⁹ The 1991 World Almanac lists 150 separate religious groups in the United States, and even these appear to be fairly “main-line”: the Church of Scientology and the Rev. Mr Moon’s Unification Church are not included, for example, nor similar institutions, although America has many such bodies, not by any means restricted to California.²⁰ The religious supermarket in other developed countries, like the real supermarkets, probably still offers somewhat fewer selections than in America, but not radically fewer, and the tendency in this as in other areas is towards the American model.

In such circumstances, there is hardly an immediate prospect that any one religion will come to dominate the national life, with power to suppress rival creeds or to persecute nonbelievers. Nor is there an ecumenical “religious” view of public policy. In their attitudes towards political questions, religious groups in the developed countries run the gamut (and not just, as Dorothy Parker said, from A to B). Many are quietist. Others have one or two pet public issues. Some tend to be politically liberal or conservative across the board; some are on the radical left or the far right. Quite apart from the ethics of public debate in a liberal society, there is scarcely much practical mileage to be had for such religious groups to argue from authority on public questions. “Vote against abortion because the Pope says so,” or “Support the Sandinistas because the National Council of Churches says so,” will persuade only those already persuaded: if anything, that sort of argument is likely to sow doubts among the faithful.

Religion, in short, is not remotely the threat to pluralism that it was in the Age of Enlightenment. And if possessing coercive convictions — rooted in empirically or logically unprovable premises — is to be the criterion for being excluded from public argument, a great many secular movements and ideas would surely cry out for exclusion together with, or long before, religion.

There is another dimension, moreover, to the argument about religion in public debate. The Enlightenment thinkers saw religious orthodoxy as an obstacle to progress, science, free choice, the society of contract, and material civilization. In the eighteenth century, all these were new and precarious things, tender shoots, intimations of a modernity that might yet die aborning.

19. U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES, Table 77, 56-57 (1992).

20. WORLD ALMANAC AND BOOK OF FACTS 609-10 (Mark S. Hoffman et al. eds., 1991).

No longer. The precarious things now, if anything, are what modernity sometimes seems to sweep away: meaning, connection to the past, identity, community, purpose, the spiritual side of life. This has certainly been an overwhelming preoccupation of twentieth century social criticism: key words and phrases include "alienation" and "corrosion of values," the Lonely Crowd and the Culture of Narcissism. The criticism extends from Marxists to traditionalists to the op-ed writers of your choice. What is implicit is that modernity, far from being vulnerable, is triumphant, even to the point that counterweights might now be desirable.²¹

Perhaps this social criticism is unjustified. Perhaps modern life is no more empty, ugly, or alienated than life under any other dispensation. Or if that is not quite right, perhaps secular modernity has answers to these problems, or at least persuasive things to say about human ends as well as about means.

But, as the Jewish joke puts it, there are really only two possibilities. Either the values of secular modernity can hold their own in a reasonably free marketplace of ideas, in which case they ought to be able to do so without stigmatizing religious arguments as somehow illegitimate or out of bounds. Or they cannot hold their own, because too many people are dissatisfied with the way of life that a purely secular modernity offers. In which case liberal society would surely owe it, not only to religious groups but also to itself, to give these groups a hearing.

In the last analysis, perhaps the best justification for liberalism is value pluralism: the idea that there are many conflicting Goods in the world, genuinely Good and genuinely conflicting, not reconcilable in any rational synthesis embodying the Greater Good.²² Liberal tolerance allows for rough and shifting compromises among the various and conflicting Goods. A liberal society ought to embrace as many of the world's contradictory Goods as it can possibly carry. And religious values are surely among these Goods. Today's religious groups, at least those with a calling to social action, offer views which are in some measure a counterweight to the values of secular modernity. The presence of such counterweights strengthens pluralism, and hence stands to strengthen liberal society itself.

21. For a small sample of American social criticism along these lines, see, e.g., CHRISTOPHER LASCH, *THE CULTURE OF NARCISSISM: AMERICAN LIFE IN AN AGE OF DIMINISHING EXPECTATIONS* (1978); JULES HENRY, *CULTURE AGAINST MAN* (1963); PAUL GOODMAN, *GROWING UP ABSURD* (1957).

22. Value pluralism is identified with the thought of Sir Isaiah Berlin and pervades his writings. See *supra* note 3.

