

REFLECTIONS ON THE CRISIS FACING MODERN DEMOCRACIES

Brendan Sweetman
Rockhurst University, USA

The view is gaining currency that modern democracy is facing a crisis. This article offers a perspective on this theme. The article argues that the crisis is not about which political perspective comes to power, or which policies governments should pursue. Arising from the foundations of the democratic system, the crisis emerges from the supreme prominence given to an absolutist interpretation of freedom, which is a defining feature of the modern democratic state. This leads to a contentious pluralism, marked by the emergence of a plurality of worldviews and a spirit of relativism, that have become characteristic features of many democratic nations. The article identifies at last three causes of this crisis of worldview pluralism: the relationship between freedom and pluralism, a loss of confidence in reason, and the failure of public deliberation. After introducing the notion of a worldview, the article goes on to consider the prominence of both religious and secularist worldviews and rejects several arguments from secular liberalism for excluding religion from public life. We draw out the implications for church and state and look at how democracies must proceed in the light of the crisis and the new realities that are a consequence of pluralism.

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INTRODUCTION

Modern democracies around the world are facing a looming crisis. While many would agree that there is much truth in this statement, there is, however, a great deal of misunderstanding about the nature of the crisis. I want to suggest in these brief reflections that the crisis is not about which particular political leader or political party has power, or about which set of policies we should pursue, or about voter apathy or disinterest, or about the amount of money in politics, or even about the hypocrisy of politicians or the incompetence of government bureaucracies (evident in their response to the Covid crisis in many countries), real and serious though these problems are. No,

democratic nations are facing a quite profound crisis that arises from the *foundations* of the democratic system; it is not to be facilely identified with abuses that might later be corrected or reduced. This general problem that democracies are facing I call the problem of worldview pluralism. It arises because of the consequences that result from the operation of freedom and pluralism within a democratic structure over the long term. The supreme prominence placed on, and absolutist interpretation of, human freedom, has had the practical effect of leading to a contentious pluralism, marked by the emergence of a plurality of worldviews and a spirit of relativism that have become characteristic features of many democratic nations.

This problem facing pluralist societies leads to deep disagreements by its very nature, not so much over this or that political leader or party, or this or that policy, but concerning what will turn out to be largely *incommensurable* views with regard to the meaning of life, the nature of human fulfillment, the correct approach to ethics, law, politics, and culture. So the problem is not a matter of being stuck with an ignorant and backward electorate, as some suggest! Many today adopt the view that the problem with many democratic countries is that the electorate is backward and stupid, even in some cases immoral and racist, and that if they would just come around to a more enlightened way of thinking on political, economic, social and cultural issues, society would quickly move back on the right track! The problem is far more serious than this, and indeed our disagreements at this surface level are simply a reflection of the deeper problem. For the fact is that, even if we had a fully informed, extremely well-educated, and perfectly moral electorate, there would still remain serious disagreements on central worldview questions of life, morality, and culture, giving rise to a contentious pluralism to which there is no obvious solution. These trends lead to what I call a clash of worldviews in the modern state, both between various religious worldviews and between religious worldviews and secularist worldviews. It is also crucial when thinking about the modern democratic state that we recognize and acknowledge that the rise of the secularist worldview is an *enormously significant development* and contributes greatly to the fractious nature of political discourse. This point has not been sufficiently appreciated by scholars and political philosophers, though it is beginning to attract more attention. Yet, despite the rise of secularism in many nations, the topic is still regarded by most scholars as more of a sociological phenomenon than as an influential trend in political philosophy that must inevitably change the way we think about the nature and structure of the modern state, as well as related issues of democracy, pluralism and the relationship between church and state.¹

The problem of worldview pluralism is not confined only to mature, settled political states, though these do tend to be at the forefront of the current debate about the crises facing modern democracies. But democracies around the world are facing the same set of problems, grappling with contentious political, social, and cultural exchanges that reflect a deeper disagreement about worldviews and the meaning of life, even if some countries are not used to framing the issues in quite this way. These problems are at their most acute in the countries of the Western Hemisphere, in the countries of Europe, the U.S., and also in the Southern Hemisphere, especially in Australia and New Zealand. Indeed, some of the same concerns arise even in Asian countries, such as the Philippines and India. Some might suggest that democracy in the Philippines is not quite in crisis, but this is not true in the light of the many problems

in recent elections that have caused serious concern. Moreover, I predict that in the fairly near future, democracy in the Philippines will face the same set of problems arising from pluralism that we see in other nations. Indeed, it is my contention that all democratic countries, whether they are fledgling or mature, largely monolithic or moving toward pluralism, will have to deal eventually with the problems that arise from worldview pluralism, moral relativism, and the rise of secularism in one form or another, and that these problems will not be easy to resolve. Indeed, part of the crisis is that there does not seem to be an obvious way out of it. Unfortunately, from our contemporary vantage point, the deeper problem facing democracy has all the hallmarks of getting worse and is in danger of becoming intractable.

IDENTIFYING SOME CAUSES OF THE CRISIS

Freedom Leads to Pluralism

The first main cause seems an obvious one, though often not fully appreciated. It is the simple fact that when you give people a lot of freedom, they *eventually* arrive at different philosophies of life. This is usually a very gradual process; nevertheless, a robust pluralism is usually the eventual outcome. Initially, most people in early democratic nations shared a worldview, and there was a cultural presumption in favor of one set of foundational beliefs, one religion, one morality, one shared understanding of the function of law, one set of cultural traditions, and so forth. The dominant worldview was also strongly enforced and reinforced by the institutions of the state in the educational system, the courts, the media, the universities, and by educated, elite opinion. Democracies functioned like this for more than a hundred years, indeed, in some countries right up until the latter half of the twentieth century. A smaller number may still function like this, yet it is clear that almost all modern democracies are influenced by the trends we are identifying in this article.

A significant cultural change began to occur when people started to exercise in practice the freedom they possessed in theory. Over a very long period of time, more than a hundred years in some countries, but rapidly gaining ground, especially in recent decades, *a pluralism of views began to materialize*. A pluralist culture is one in which there are a variety of diverse perspectives held by significantly large numbers of people with regard to the general area of worldviews and the meaning of life. These different outlooks also give rise, of course, to different ways of living and to different perspectives on the issues of the day. And so, disagreements at the political and moral level are not far behind. At first, many found the breakout that the exercise of individual freedom provides on matters of religion, culture, and morality novel, even intriguing, and it was often welcomed in some quarters, especially among the intelligentsia. However, it is an important fact that eventually, the rise of pluralism started to become troubling and contentious in many democratic countries. Again, this was a gradual process and was not perhaps an obvious trend at first, but progressively it gained steam, and today many countries are right in the midst of it.

Pluralism started to become contentious and frustrating for two main reasons. The first is that after the novelty and excitement that initially accompanies the

loosening of social and cultural shackles begin to wear off, people come to realize that they are left with serious disagreements about momentous issues of morality and politics, culture, and life with family members, their friends, in their communities, and at the national political level. Gradually, it becomes clear that nothing less than the future direction of society is at stake, along with the shaping of culture (thereby presaging the recent “culture wars” in many countries). There was no immediate problem when new and novel beliefs, attitudes, and practices began to appear, but as they gained clout and cultural influence, and significant numbers started agitating more directly for societal reform based on their worldview, something of a crisis situation began to germinate. The second reason is more foundational and, indeed, more troubling. This is the growing realization not only that one’s differences with others are serious but that nothing can really be done about solving these disagreements. It gradually became clear that an increasingly educated general public, along with rational debate, logical argument, and consideration of evidence, could not succeed in resolving our differences. It slowly became evident that others with different views were not persuaded by our arguments; people were troubled when they discovered that they were unable to convince others of what they regarded as the truth, and so what was initially an interesting and novel phenomenon started to become a *problem*. And so cultural leaders and reformers began to get irritated at their failure to convince others and, more generally, at the often intractable nature of public discourse.

The upshot of this pluralism is that it leads to incommensurable worldviews; that is to say, *worldviews that are fundamentally in conflict with each other and that cannot be reconciled with each other* because they hold opposing beliefs on the nature of reality and the human person, and consequently on moral and political issues. The presence of incommensurable worldviews leads to social and cultural conflict in matters relating to public policy and concerning which values our laws should embody—among church denominations, in academia, in social and political action groups, and even in business and the workplace. Almost every area of life in modern democracies is now showing some acquaintance with this problem of worldview pluralism, the problem of how to handle different and incommensurable worldviews in the same state.

Loss of Confidence in Reason

A second contributory factor to the rise of a fractious pluralism is that there has been a general loss of confidence in reason to help us with our worldview disagreements. People have almost given up on what was traditionally regarded as the ideal approach to public deliberation, especially in a democratic context. We have now reached the stage where, especially in political debates, our disagreements are often approached from a *tactical* point of view of how to best position ourselves to advance our causes rather than seeking to engage in a genuine debate aimed at the most truthful or best solution. We saw this clearly even in dealing with a worldwide calamity such as the Covid pandemic, where many people, including politicians, media pundits, and academics, often approached the issues politically rather than rationally and scientifically.

There is another very influential trend today which contributes to the denigration of reason. This is what philosophers call the anti-realist approach to knowledge. The common sense view of knowledge, the standard view, the view that the ordinary person holds and works with, is that the human mind, in the act of knowing, comes to know the world as it is in itself, as it exists in a real and objective way outside the mind (the view known as realism in philosophy). Until recently, realism was the dominant view of knowledge held by most academic disciplines, including philosophy, religion, ethics, history, science, and psychology. All academic disciplines advocate claims that their proponents think accurately describe the real world, claims that are presented as being objectively true independently of the opinion of the person expressing them. Of course, one might be wrong about what one claims to be true, but this does not alter the fact that one understands the truth in this objective sense. The pursuit of objective truth, then, is what is involved in the search for knowledge, and this knowledge is seen as a good thing to help human beings understand the world better, to improve our lives in both material areas such as medicine and communications, but also in deeper areas such as in politics, morality, religion, culture, and the social arrangements of society. Indeed, usually, those who advocate democratic values (such as freedom, equality, justice, and natural rights) and the democratic form of government itself do so because they believe that it is an objective fact that these values and this form of government are morally superior to others.

However, the view known as anti-realism has become more dominant in the past generation and has led to the severe compromising of the possibility of finding objective truth. The opposite of realism, anti-realism is the view that the mind, *in the process or act of knowing*, somehow modifies (or filters) the content of what is known. So, when I come to know things in the world about topics concerning morality, religion, and politics, and even about more accessible topics, such as about physical objects and their properties, this knowing is somehow compromised or modified in the *act of knowing* itself, according to the anti-realist. The upshot is that we do not have access to the real things themselves, to the realm of objective truth, even though we mistakenly think we do. Of course, this is a very radical and much-contested view of knowledge, one subject to many difficulties, but the crucial point is that it has become dominant in the intellectual approach to the understanding of the nature of knowledge. It then filters down to ordinary life in ways that many people will recognize, especially in areas of religion, morality, politics, and the meaning of life.

Despite its roots in quite abstract philosophical theories of knowledge, the practical effect of the anti-realist approach is now becoming more familiar to people who are trying to engage in ordinary public discourse. The anti-realist position drives the popular view today that the “knower” always brings ideological biases to any subject under study, to any set of claims or arguments, including questions of morality and politics, no matter how hard one might try to avoid this. We see this view gaining defining influence in many areas, including in education, the arts, and psychology, and so it spreads to religion, ethics, politics, and the analysis of culture. In short, there is a subjective dimension in varying degrees present in all of our claims to “objective” truth. The subjective dimension, along with our biases, influences our interpretations of the “facts” so that our results are compromised in the sense that although they purportedly describe objective reality, they fall short of this. This difficulty would

afflict all areas of research if anti-realism is true (and not just research that one might disapprove of). For, according to the anti-realist, everyone brings biases to any investigation, including *the anti-realist himself*, a relativism about knowledge that many will not find credible, notwithstanding the point that one thing we can learn from the anti-realist argument is that we should be mindful of the biases we might bring to an issue, and try not to let them influence our conclusions.

Problematic and counter-intuitive though this view is, and also the fact that it is inconsistently applied,² we cannot understate its influence on the state of knowledge claims as we move into the twenty-first century. One odd effect of it is that although it is associated with loss of meaning, alienation, despair, and even nihilism among some groups and in some areas of society and culture, it also can have the practical effect of making people *even more entrenched* in their views than ever, more certain of their views in ethics and politics. The fact that many are seduced by the view that there is really no objective answer to many of the questions in dispute produces more ideological political actors who do not see much point in pursuing truth in a public debate but rather approach the matter from the point of view of how to promote one's own political and moral positions at all costs. In short, politics and power relations now frequently trump rational deliberation, consensus-building, and the pursuit of truth.

Anti-realism is an important cause of the loss of confidence in reason today. It can perhaps be described as a foundational cause, a cause at the level of theory, one with very significant influence. I am not claiming that anti-realism naturally emerges from the democratic system, though it is, I believe, closely connected to the practice of free expression, though hardly a direct consequence of it. But anti-realism and relativism filter down then from the academic community to the general population in different ways, especially to the intellectual class who, of course, train many leaders and respected groups in society, such as teachers, clergy, judges, lawyers, journalists, politicians, and civic leaders. So I think it does play a formative role in many people's attitudes toward debate in the public square today, especially with regard to expectations for what such a debate can achieve.

The Failure of Public Deliberation

A closely related third factor in the crisis we have been describing is our experience of the process of deliberative discussion and rational debate. Many are now coming to the uncomfortable realization that arguments that seem persuasive to them fail to convince others; at the same time, they recognize that arguments offered by others do not persuade them, so sadly, everyone is in the same boat. Often, the best we can achieve is a political or moral standoff. This invites us to give into the temptation to adopt a position of ridiculing or mocking our interlocutors, perhaps trying to bully them, especially if we are in a position where we have either individual or cultural control over them (perhaps through the media or the *zeitgeist*). I may paint them as irrational, stupid, uninformed, psychologically troubled, even mentally ill, as possessing undesirable qualities (such as being authoritarian, racist, wishy-washy, soft, weak, or too easily influenced by emotion!). Yet this kind of rebuff is not productive and just leads to more deeply entrenched views since my ridicule is sure to provoke a

reciprocal response, hasten polarization in society, and further abandonment of reasonable discourse.

A common approach is to simply accept that one will be unable to convince others and that there will be little compromise or consensus, so one settles for the strategy of forcing one's views on others whenever the opportunity presents itself. This strategy requires that one be strongly committed to the superiority of one's view. It also means that one is not inclined to engage seriously in public discourse, to subject one's views to debate and discussion, because this stage has been passed and has failed. So one becomes convinced that reasoned discourse is no longer productive. This is where we see the transition from holding a philosophical view of life, a worldview, to holding that worldview now as an ideology, where we understand the notion of ideology primarily in its negative sense. The negative meaning emerges when one begins to regard one's opponents as morally wrong and adopts the practice of generally avoiding discussion and debate concerning issues of disagreement because one believes that discourse, even if carried out reasonably and with goodwill, is futile. One adopts a pragmatic approach to pluralism: that reasonable discourse is fruitless and that our differences now require us to enjoin in a political battle, and may the strongest side win.

So, worldviews quickly turn into ideologies, a dangerous development that threatens the foundations of democracy. We fall into the mindset of interpreting *every issue* from the point of view of our ideology. We are no longer willing to consider issues from the point of view of others and from a philosophical point of view. Nor are we open to changing our minds on most topics, so we are less inclined to listen to an opposing argument or a review of evidence. Yet crucially, the ideologue still relies upon controversial assumptions without which his or her position is not plausible; for example, a feminist may assume that gender is a social construction in her advocacy of certain moral, political, and social views; a religious believer may assume that the soul exists in an argument against abortion; the secularist may assume that there is no afterlife in an argument for euthanasia. The ideologue then *refuses to acknowledge* that their assumptions are either controversial or debatable and that others may legitimately hold a different view. Moreover, every argument that is offered on the issues under dispute *relies upon acceptance of the controversial assumption*. This is the primary way that ideology operates in modern pluralist societies. It is a phenomenon that has even spread to the universities. It is becoming increasingly difficult, even at the academic level, to have a rational discussion concerning very important issues of society and culture, such as abortion, gender analysis and relations, just war, immigration, policies proposed to solve social problems, and so forth.

WORLDVIEWS TAKE CENTER STAGE

All of this means that it is very fruitful for us to approach modern cultural pluralism through the concept of a worldview. I have argued that this concept is very valuable when discussing substantive questions of meaning, freedom, culture, and politics that arise within democratic states.³ The term is especially useful because it encompasses *all* worldviews, not just religious worldviews, and it draws attention in

discussions of pluralism and politics to the fact that *everyone* is approaching the matter from the perspective of a worldview and is also, at the same time, trying to influence the direction of the culture and the makeup of laws in their respective democratic nations. Sometimes religious worldviews, which also differ among themselves (let us not forget) and so also contribute to the problem of pluralism, are regarded as wishing to influence society but other worldviews, such as secularist views, are not so regarded. This is a significant error in thinking about modern pluralism, given that the secularist worldview has become influentially prominent in so many democracies, especially in the Western hemisphere, in recent times, a topic we will come back to later.

We do not have time to discuss the fascinating topic of the nature and structure of worldviews here in any detail, a topic that would take us too far afield, but let us make a few general points. We will also raise a few questions that help focus more directly on the notion and help us see that worldviews are clearly operating in contemporary pluralist democracies, including in our own lives. I wish to encourage people in democratic nations going forward to focus more on their worldviews than they might have done up to now. In addition, we should take more careful note of the role they play in our social, cultural, economic, political, and moral views, and especially the role they might play in one's view of desirable legislation going forward in one's country and so forth. One's worldview describes one's beliefs on key foundational aspects of life. I like to organize the general concept under three sets of beliefs: beliefs about the nature of reality, beliefs about the nature of the human person, and beliefs about moral and political values. Beliefs with regard to this range of topics regulate how people live, how they bring up their children, and how they think society should be governed. My claim about worldviews, in general, is that everyone has a worldview, or their main, foundational beliefs can be organized in the above three categories, even if they seldom think of their worldview in a formal way or realize they are living according to it, or that they wish to influence society by means of it. However, it is true that in many democracies, the fact of pluralism has made people focus more than ever before on what it is they believe and why, and also on the fact that their key beliefs in the categories mentioned *differ* from those of many others. This is why we have the problem of pluralism in the first place, a problem that many are becoming increasingly aware of and indeed worried about as we move into the twenty-first century.

People now recognize that not everyone shares their worldview and that the disagreement between worldviews, especially at the moral and political level, can cause great consternation and conflict. They likely experience this conflict and tension in their own circle of family and friends, in the workplace, and at the societal level, including at the national level. This is one of the consequences of pluralism. Indeed, in some countries, public discussion and debate on important topics is becoming very difficult to conduct and is leading to polarization; even public institutions, as we noted, such as academia, the law courts, and the media, are becoming overtly political. The very fact of pluralism prompts people to give more attention to what they believe. Pluralism prompts us to realize that others do not have the same beliefs as we do, and this, in turn, forces us to think more clearly about our own beliefs and also, hopefully, about why we hold them.

So, in thinking about one's worldview, one might focus on several important, clarifying questions. The first involves identifying what your worldview is and your main beliefs in the three categories mentioned above. One may have to think hard about some of these beliefs, but it is a very useful exercise to explore one's position in these general categories, which can sometimes be aided by thinking about what one's everyday moral and political beliefs might imply for larger questions. For example, what does one's everyday beliefs (and resulting actions) imply about one's view of the human person, or about where one might stand on the question of whether human beings differ in degree or in kind from other species, or on the question of whether or not God exists, or on the question of the relationship between religion and science, faith and reason, church and state, or on whether human beings consist of body and soul, and so forth? The second question is about the reasonability of your worldview, specifically whether you would judge that your worldview is reasonable and whether you have made an attempt to think about how you might defend it in the face of objections. I have in mind common sense questions such as: are you able to back up your main beliefs with reason and evidence, could you present an argument defending your beliefs to those who reject them, do you know the critical issues involved in a debate concerning your beliefs and the beliefs of others, have you considered the overall philosophical justification of your views?

Our third question is a key one for democracy and pluralism: it asks us to focus on the *political* implications of our worldview, a topic quite often overlooked in this discussion. Almost all worldviews have beliefs that have political implications for how society should be organized; they contain some beliefs concerning the way human beings should live and conduct themselves in society, about which beliefs and behaviors with regard to various issues are morally appropriate. One clear example is the belief that all people are equal. One may hold this belief whether one is a secularist, a religious believer, or a Marxist, for instance. This belief mandates laws in many aspects of life, including in education, employment, legal proceedings, and so forth, to identify only a few. There are many beliefs in our worldviews where one simply could not live with integrity if one were to ignore their political implications. We should also consider, fourthly, what one's *attitude* is to other worldviews that one does not agree with, since this is often a source of the contentious pluralism we experience today. Do you regard these worldviews as reasonable? Wrong in whole or in part, or perhaps as irrational and/or immoral, or what? Are you the kind of person who thinks that when it comes to these matters, most people are stupid and their worldviews irrational, and your worldview is (*obviously*) the correct one?! These are challenging questions that we must focus on as the phenomenon of pluralism moves to the front burner.

A final point we need to underscore is that the term "worldview"—when used to identify, describe and call attention to different ways of looking at the world in a democratic state—is a *transformative* term. It is not only transformative on a personal level but also at the level of politics and society. The term has great power because it can help us see the foundational issues involving the nature of democracy, as well as disagreements within democratic societies, in a totally new way. It is also immensely helpful when trying to appreciate and understand the role of religious worldviews and secularist worldviews in the modern state, as well as in showing that the way we have been thinking about these topics up to now must be significantly revised.

RELIGION AND SECULARISM IN MODERN DEMOCRACIES

The view is now widespread that people should keep their religion to themselves, should practice it privately, and not bring it into public policy issues. Even though in many democratic nations, people do, as a matter of fact, bring their religion into public policy, it is quickly becoming the default view among academics, intellectuals, and many politicians that *one should not do this*. That when we make decisions about policy matters, such as abortion, embryonic stem cell research, drug policies, immigration, or euthanasia, for example, whatever values we use to decide such difficult topics, *they should not include religious values*. So what values then would be allowed? The often unexpressed answer is that the secularist worldview should be the guiding force. I think recent policies and debates in the European Union provide a clear example of this, but it is a trend that is now *common* in many democracies.

In order to sustain such a position (which sounds discriminatory and arbitrary on its face), one must show that there is something wrong with religious belief if, in principle, it should play no role in public life. However, our reflections above on the problem of worldview pluralism help us to see that none of the arguments offered to exclude religion from making a contribution to democracy are convincing. Let us consider briefly some of the common arguments.

1. *Not everyone is a religious believer*: Appealing to the claim that since not everyone is a religious believer (and so should not have to live in a society influenced by religious morality, for instance) will not work for the simple reason that this is true of every worldview! This is what pluralism means: it means that people disagree on the key issues of the day and that however certain I may be of my views, others will reject them. But this is true no less of secularism, Marxism, secular humanism, anarchism, and atheistic communism than it is of religious worldviews (and let us not overlook the key fact that religions disagree among themselves also). So this argument is not sufficient to justify discrimination against religious worldviews. If a secularist view on a topic like euthanasia were to prevail in a public debate, it would be a fact that not everyone would agree with the secularist worldview or their position on euthanasia, but that does not mean that they are not entitled to contribute to the public deliberation on the topic in a free and democratic state. The same applies to religious worldviews.

2. *The religious worldview is not rational*: A common move is to adopt the position, advanced by political philosopher John Rawls and his recent disciples, that religion is not a rational view.⁴ Sometimes, this view is expressed by saying that religion regards itself as above reason, or that faith cannot be assessed in a rational way, and that political arguments should be based only on appeals to reason and evidence, and so forth. The view is now very popular among intellectuals that religion is a matter of faith, where faith is understood in its most negative sense as involving irrational or non-rational beliefs or as involving commitment to various beliefs without evidence, or at least without regard to the evidence. This is an easy but facile way of dismissing religion, and the implication, of course, is supposed to be that secularist views alone are reasonable. This has been a constant theme in twentieth-century secularist approaches in the debate with religious belief. It is, however, an argument

that must be rejected. Although we cannot give a full discussion of this central claim here, the long tradition of natural theology and, in general of philosophical arguments and support for the rationality of a religious view of reality supports the conclusion that we cannot accept a superficial dismissal of religion as simply being a matter of faith and not reason, and therefore as not worthy of participation in public deliberation in a democracy. In any case, if there is a dispute about the rationality of religious belief vs. the rationality of secularism (in general or on any specific issue), this is a dispute that must be settled democratically, according to democratic principles of free speech. This allows individual citizens to make up their own minds, choosing one's worldview for oneself—rather than having a privileged worldview or position or set of values deciding *in advance* which worldviews (and beliefs) are worthy (i.e., sufficiently rational) in a democratic setting and which are not. Not every question, perhaps, for practical reasons, can be settled this way; it is adequate that one could make up one's mind rationally on a topic in a private setting (e.g., in academic discussions) and then assume the results in a public argument.⁵

This general secularist attitude toward religious belief is often a smokescreen for refusing to recognize that it is simply a fact in contemporary pluralist democracies that no matter how certain I am of my own views or how enlightened one thinks one is, there are others who will disagree, sometimes very strongly. Rather than facing up to this issue and engaging in democratic deliberation, the secularist view, in particular, is tempted to invent a *qualitative difference* between their views and religious views, a difference that has the consequence that secularism is more deserving of influence on the state than religion. But we must, in general, reject such an approach as not possible to justify from a philosophical point of view and as unfair and undemocratic.

Yet this is why we regularly see well-known democratic principles, such as the separation of church and state or the right to free speech, trampled upon, inconsistently applied, or invoked in hypocritical ways because those who claim to uphold them do not do so as principles but rather as *tactics* to be used to solve democratic disagreements *in their favor*. We must reject this approach and insist that such principles be applied fairly and consistently so that the right to free speech, for example, applies to all worldviews and not just to views one favors politically. With regard to many such democratic principles, religious believers are used to being treated as second-class citizens by establishment thinking in many democracies.

3. *Religion is dangerous*: The argument is sometimes advanced, even today in developed and stable democracies, that religious views are too divisive, prone to cause social unrest, and sometimes excessively judgmental. So because of such features, religion may *still* be treated differently than secularist worldviews, even in a contemporary liberal, democratic culture. I submit that, whatever about the past, this is an argument we cannot accept today. Those days are long gone in most modern democracies, and the threat of social unrest caused by religion is no longer a serious concern in the debate between worldviews. We should also recognize that a risk of zealotry and even persecution may come from *any* worldview. Indeed, it is a feature of pluralism that many are becoming increasingly harsh toward those with the “wrong views.” We have seen much zeal from secular liberalism and politically leftist religious views in recent times in many countries, the same kind of dogmatic attitude that was often attributed in the past to extreme religious views. It is the same mindset,

the same fervor, the same sense of self-righteousness leading to moral blindness, the same certainty concerning a set of unquestionable beliefs (often such beliefs can play the same role as dogmas in the sense that they are not open to question)—just a different ideology. Whatever about the past, that is the situation today, and the evidence to support it is everywhere around us.

4. *Separation of church and state*: our arguments above force us to rethink the separation between church and state, a crucial concept that modern pluralism calls upon us to re-envision in the light of the new realities. Although I cannot develop this point in this article, I do want to suggest that it is now time to rethink the distinction between church and state.⁶ The conventional understanding of their relationship is becoming out of date. This understanding has two aspects to it, depending on which democracy we are considering. The first aspect is that a modern democracy will have no official religion, or at least will not have an official religion to the exclusion of all others.⁷ The second aspect is that liberal democracies will allow freedom of religion within the state. One has the freedom to choose one's religious beliefs (or secularist beliefs), what one believes about God, about God's nature, and about morality, politics, and law. It also includes the freedom to practice one's religion, to rear one's children in that religion, and the freedom to promote one's religious beliefs in society.

But this general understanding of the relationship between church and state no longer reflects the times because of the simple fact that many people today do not subscribe to religious worldviews. It was easy for states to write constitutional principles concerning religion when everyone subscribed to not only a religious worldview but often the same or a very similar worldview. Today, we have considerable religious diversity, not only of different religions but even within the same religion (where in many cases, orthodox and liberal views might as well be different religions). So, we cannot presume much in common, even if, in principle, many religious believers would share foundational beliefs. Moreover, we also have the rise of secularism and other versions of philosophical atheism.⁸ So it is not appropriate to approach the topic as if religious worldviews are the only ones, nor should we single them out for special mention in our laws. This is simply not tenable in what we might call the age of secularism (or the age of pluralism), where secularism has grown considerably and ostentatiously seeks to influence the culture according to its vision of morality and the good life. We must also recognize that there are many churches, each representing different paths in life. In this way, while there are important differences when it comes to promoting political and moral views, churches are not all that different from political parties or other interest groups. In many democratic nations, it is quite easy to distinguish between “conservative” and “liberal” religions, and they are mainly defined by their *political, moral, and social views*. As also noted earlier, we fail to appreciate the significance of the fact that secularism, too, is an influential contemporary worldview and do not give this fact enough attention or weight in the discussion. Given all of this, it changes the way we should regard religious belief—one should now see it as one worldview *among many* (or, more accurately, as *several* worldviews among *a wider set* of worldviews).

It follows then that when writing constitutions in democratic states, it is no longer appropriate to single out religious worldviews for special attention in the law. Singling out religious views, say by including a clause that stipulates that there will be

no established religion, is to discriminate against religion because this leaves it open that some secularist worldview could become the basis of law, either in whole or in part. I have described a state where secularism is either the established worldview or where various laws and practices are based on secularist beliefs and values as a *seculocracy*.⁹ This term may also be understood to describe a state where religion is frowned upon in the sense that citizens are discouraged from appealing to it in many facets of life. A seculocracy may be understood further as a state where religion is banned, restricted, or so strongly discouraged that it is often ineffective in contributing to democratic deliberation. So I suggest that the time is now ripe for us to rethink the relationship between church and state to refine it so that it is more in line with the reality of modern pluralism. Although we need to continue to think further about this key question, it seems obvious that it is no longer appropriate to single out religious worldviews in the laws of a modern democracy either to protect them or to discriminate against them.¹⁰

PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND THE FUTURE

Let us conclude with a few points about the nature of public discourse as we look toward the future. The first important thing to note is that we must take to heart and be fully aware of the *new pluralist landscape*. This means that we recognize that we are dealing with different and usually conflicting worldviews in public deliberations and that there is not one religious view anymore but a number of different religious views. We must recognize that secularism, too, is a worldview, and indeed we could even refer to secularisms since there is more than one version. Although it is true in general that we can put all or most religious views in the same category, and similarly with secularist views (since, respectively, they will have common foundational beliefs at the general level), it is also true that these views differ among themselves on some important beliefs, and on moral, social and political issues. This is the salient point when it comes to the pluralist debate in a modern democratic culture. We must also be clear that no plausible case can be made for excluding religion from politics that would not also apply to non-religious positions.

This new understanding should encourage us, secondly, to adopt a reasonable approach to public debate. It is important to make an effort to try to present reasonable arguments in the public square. I believe one can do this for religious views, as I have noted above and argued elsewhere.¹¹ Approaching a contentious topic in a reasonable way, where one appeals to logic and argument, and evidence where relevant, not only shows others that you are reasonable, but it also puts an onus on your interlocutors to debate with you, and take you seriously. In a way, the debate itself will give dignity and draw attention to your beliefs when others might be tempted to ignore them or pretend disingenuously that they think they are irrational as a way of avoiding engagement with them. Being reasonable can go a long way, not only in terms of one's own reputation but also in terms of making progress in terms of tolerance, compromise, and even occasional agreement. We should welcome debate and discussion rather than simply trying to avoid it or shut it down before it begins.

Third, we must settle our differences in a democratic manner. This seems vital because the problem of worldview pluralism creates a strong temptation to circumvent the democratic process in various ways because of our inability to persuade a majority of the rational and moral superiority of our beliefs. It is now commonplace in some countries to try to find some other way of imposing one's views on society if one cannot achieve success through the ballot box. One popular way is through the courts system, especially obvious in the United States, where the U.S. Supreme Court, and increasingly lower level courts, decide many contentious issues based on the political opinions of judges and despite the clear reading of the law. The court system in many countries is often now regarded *as a political branch of government*. The selection, evaluation process, and future prospects of the judiciary are frequently decided along political lines (rather than on qualifications, academic brilliance, or impressive track records). Consequently, the judiciary and legal-decision making are becoming much more political than they were in the past (indeed, in recent years, the U.S. High Court system seems to be increasingly broken and is now routinely regarded by the politicians, the media, the intelligentsia and even the judges themselves as a political branch of government). Congress or Parliament may also occasionally take positions from time to time that do not represent the will of the people.

Yet the most democratic way to settle our differences must be at the ballot box. The majority, of course, can make mistakes and may decide issues incorrectly from a rational or moral point of view, but the democratic way is the fairest because at least every citizen of voting age has an opportunity to participate. This is better than some elite groups, especially a non-elected elite group or a (supposedly enlightened) minority viewpoint, deciding contentious issues for the majority. The latter is becoming more common, especially in the way that the European Union and various international bodies (including economic bodies) operate, but it is against the spirit of democracy and is generally to the detriment of individual citizens because it compromises their right to self-determination.

NOTES

1. For some helpful studies of the phenomenon of secularization and related notions, see Steve Bruce (2001) *Secularization*; Craig Calhoun *et al*, (2011) *Rethinking secularism*; Christian Smith (2003) *The secular revolution*; Joseph Ratzinger and Jurgen Habermas (2007) *The dialectics of secularization: On reason and religion*; David Martin (1979) *A general theory of secularization*; Jove Jim S. Aguas (2019) The challenge of secularization to the Christian belief in God. *Philosophia; International Journal of Philosophy*.

2. Anti-realism, as a philosophical theory of knowledge, faces very serious objections. These include the key question of how does the modifying (or filtering) involved in the act of knowing actually work. No philosopher has ever provided a detailed answer to this question; instead, an appeal is usually made to vague and unhelpful generalities of the form “language produces meaning,” or “one’s cultural background defines what one knows,” claims that are too vague to support such a radical thesis. A second problem is one of contradiction, which afflicts the claim that “all knowledge is perspectival.” Is this claim itself perspectival? If yes, then it is not objective; if no, then all

knowledge does not come from a perspective. In addition, anti-realism would condemn us to extreme relativism because, in its modern forms, it usually proposes that filters differ from person to person, thereby making knowledge relative to each individual an impractical, chaotic conclusion. Finally, anti-realism is often appealed to in order to debunk tradition (usually religious and moral tradition), but the problem always is that this debunking would also apply to the view installed instead of the tradition, another contradiction at the heart of the view. For a full discussion, see Stuart Brock and Edwin Mares (2007) *Realism and Anti-Realism*.

3. See Chapter 1 of my (2006) *Why politics needs religion: The place of religious arguments in the public square*.

4. See John Rawls (1999) *A theory of justice*; his (1996) *Political liberalism*; also, his (1997) *The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*. *The University of Chicago Law Review*.

5. For more on the topic of the rationality of religious belief, especially as it pertains to the topic of religion in public deliberation, see my (2021) *The crisis of democratic pluralism*, Ch.8. On the general question of the rationality of religious belief vs. the rationality of secularism, see Joel C. Sagut (2022) *Faith and reason in the Catholic intellectual tradition*; Richard Swinburne (2004) *The Existence of God* and the works of a host of contemporary philosophers, including especially those of Edward Feser, William Lane Craig, Alvin Plantinga, and Michael Rae, among countless others.

6. For more on this central concept, see Chapter 10 of my (2021) *The crisis of democratic pluralism*, where I elaborate on several of the ideas and arguments in this article.

7. For further discussion of the vexed question of the relationship between church and state, see J. Martinez–Torrón and C. Durham (2014) *Religion and the secular state*; J. Christopher Soper, et al (2017) *The challenge of pluralism: Church and state in six democracies*; Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, (1997) *Religion in the public square*.

8. A great deal of interesting research has been carried out in an attempt to identify the phenomena behind social change in various democracies, dealing with such issues as the expansion of freedom, church and state, secularization, modernization, advances in technology, and their effects on the modern mind. Much of this work has been done by sociologists; as a representative sample, see Grace Davie (2000) *Religion in modern Europe*; Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner (1974) *The homeless mind: Modernization and consciousness*; Callum Brown (2001) *The death of Christian Britain*; Andrew Greeley (1996) *Religious change in America*; Ahmet T. Kuri (2009) *Secularism and state policies toward religion: The United States, France, and Turkey*; Olivier Roy (2019) *Is Europe Christian?*

9. See my (2006) *Why politics needs religion*, pp.65–66.

10. For various perspectives on the issue of religion in public life in a democracy, see Michael J. Perry (1987) *Religion in politics*; Richard John Neuhaus (1984) *The naked public square*; Gavin D’Costa et al. (2013) *Religion in a liberal state*; Kent Greenawalt (1995) *Private consciences and public reasons*; Christopher Eberle (2002) *Religious conviction in liberal politics*; Robert Audi (2000) *Religious commitment and secular reason*; and my (2006) *Why politics needs religion*.

11. See my (2006) *Why politics needs religion*, for a full discussion of this topic.

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