Should religion be kept out of politics?

The attempts to eradicate religious perspectives from democratic government which can be seen throughout many countries in Europe (particularly in France, where public displays of religion are banned or frowned upon) is accompanied by a mirroring movement pushing to remove all separation between religious and secular law (most notable in Saudi Arabia, where 'the Basic Law of 1992, Article 1 declares the Qur'an as the constitution of the country'[1]). The main ideal behind the push for secularism is the belief that it is fairer to all religions in a multicultural society if no religions are in power and laws focus only on non-religious issues but attempts to secularise society are of largely Christian European origin and the differing attitudes toward secularism found in the world are not only the result of a cultural difference but also of a difference which is particularly marked in modern day Europe where the largest religion is Christianity and the second largest is Islam.[2] Excluding religion from politics marginalises huge sections of society and creates an unrepresentative parliament, something that is the antithesis of democracy.

One of the main reasons given to promote secularism is the belief that public displays of religion or religious leaders voicing their opinions about political matters might offend people of other faiths or none. In his address to the assembly in Westminster Hall in 2010, Pope Benedict XVI voiced his concern at the 'increasing marginalization of religion, particularly of Christianity… There are those who would advocate that the voice of religion be silenced'.[3] In France, the strong secularist principles on which government was founded after the French Revolution persist to this day and manifest in bans on religious expression (wearing a niqab or cross or having religious images on the walls) not only for people in public roles but also anyone working in the public sphere or even going to a state-run school. It seems paradoxical to suggest that marginalising and suppressing all expressions of faith could be the way to promote a multi-faith society and protect the rights of minority religions.

In most secular states, the majority religion is Christianity and this is not simply a coincidence; there are strong links between Christianity and secularism but to understand these links, we must first recognise that there are two different types of religious influence in political affairs. The first is when leader have power in both realms (such as the Pope or the Queen of England who exercise both religious and political power). The society into which Jesus was born would have been very familiar with this type of religious involvement; for the Jews, the religious leaders (Pharisees and Sadducees) were also the political leaders in the Sanhedrin, and for the Romans, the political leader (the Emperor) was worshipped as a god. This is the type of religious involvement feared by many who would promote secularism and also the type of which Jesus was accused when crucified as 'King of the Jews'.[4]

The second type of religious involvement in politics is when a religious believer who does not have political power follows their religious convictions to try to change society. Jesus is a prime example of this. He did not try to seize political control but told the people to 'give back to Ceasar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's'.[5] However, He was not afraid of upsetting the political powers to get His message across as we see in the Clearing of the Temple and the disagreements over the Sabbath laws that He had with the Pharisees and Sadducees.[6] Similarly, although much of what St.

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[1] Abiad, Nisrine. *Sharia, Muslim States and International Human Rights Treaty Obligations: A Comparative Study.* London: British Institute of International and Comparative Law, 2008.

[2] Office for National Statistics, "What Does the Census Tell Us about Religion in 2011?" (2013) Accessed 28 Mar. 2014.

[3] Pope Benedict XVI in his address to Westminster Hall, 2010, as found at http://www.thepapalvisit.org.uk/

[4] Matt. 17:11.

[5] Matt. 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25.

[6] E.g. Mark 2; Mark 3.

Paul preached could be seen as political, it was not with a view to changing the existing political system that he said it, ('Let everyone be subject to the governing authority'[7]) but rather with a view to changing society, regardless of politicians.

Because in modern politics, the focus of policy is almost always on what will get the most votes in the next election, what might be the most morally good thing to do can be side-lined. Religious leaders and lay people can provide another perspective and bring to politics the sense of morality that many politicians seem to lack. Wilberforce's campaign for the abolition of the slave trade in Britain was 'built upon firm ethical principles [and] rooted in the natural law'[8] and was very unpopular at first, especially among politicians. Similarly, Archbishop Desmond Tutu was one of the forerunners in the campaign for a peaceful end to Apartheid in South Africa and after the regime fell, he chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to help the country recover its stability. Religious intervention, therefore, is invaluable in helping a governing body act morally, whether it is religious leaders such as Popes, Archbishops, Rabbis and Imams speaking out in the name of their followers, or lay people following their convictions based on moral standards learnt from their religion. It would be not only impossible but illogical to attempt to remove all traces of religion from the political sphere. A democratic government is supposed to represent the wishes of the people and eradicating religion from politics would lead to an unrepresentative parliament, something that democracies claim to avoid.

Most of Christian scripture and tradition is not concerned with political issues, and encourages its followers either to support or ignore the political structure they find themselves in, making Christianity particularly well suited to existing in a secular, or even hostile, society. It is therefore not surprising that 'the historical development of the different models [of secularism] originated in the West and relied on the subsequent 'Europeanisation' of the world.[9] Far from levelling the playing field, secularism could just be another example of Christianity controlling society, especially as many other religions have far less secular beginnings. This is particularly true of Islam, the second largest and the fastest growing religion in the EU. When Muhammad became the recognised leader of a community after the *Hegira* of 622 CE, he had to deal political and social issues as well as religious issues: 'A fair number of Medinan passages in the Qur'an are, therefore, of direct social and political relevance… laws of inheritance, marriage and divorce but also financial and commercial regulations, rules of warfare… the treatment of slaves, etc.'[10] Because so much of the Qur'an is focused on political issues, any separation between political issues, any separation between politics and religion could only be superficial and 'the principle that Islam is *dīn wa dunya wa dawla* (religion, society, and state) cannot be touched.'[11] Therefore, although Christianity would not suffer much from being practised under a secular government, other religions such as Islam could be severely limited. In his book *111 Questions on Islam*, Samir Khalil Samir asserts that the separation between religion and state is necessary for Islam to progress. However, because so much of Islam's holy texts are about political principles, the separation would not only be difficult but could be greatly damaging to the religion as a whole. Islam, to operate properly, must have at least some control over aspects of political life and without this, it is not only marginalised but suppressed, which can lead to social unrest and push some of its followers to extreme acts such as the events of 9/11 and the July bombings in London.

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[7] Rom. 13:1.
[8] Pope Benedict XVI in his address to Westminster Hall, 2010, as found at http://www.thepapalvisit.org.uk/
[9] Berman, Bhargava and Laliberté, *Secular States and Religious Diversity,* p. 7.
[10] McAuliffe, *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an,* p. 273.
[11] Samir, Paolucci, and Eid, *111 Questions on Islam.*

Although secularism may seem to be the way to support a multi-faith society, it is actually a way to create an atheistic society with many social problems and unrest caused by the suppression of religion. In the name of fairness, secularism takes Christian ideologies and uses them, ostensibly to prevent religious suppression, but in reality suppressing religions, particularly minority religions. Without a chance to speak out in government about their problems, these minority religions can be marginalised more easily by people who are against them. Allowing religion to have influence in politics, even if this is simply speaking out about issues and not necessarily being part of the ruling process, provides the political sphere with a moral yardstick and an outsider's opinion to help check the drive for votes from dominating all political decisions.

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