

The Power of Majorities and Church-State Separation

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Abstract

This dissertation addresses the debate about the proper role of religion in the public sphere. However, this is not ‘yet another thesis’ on the subject, because it is approached from a point of view that is usually overlooked by contemporary political philosophers. Namely, the relationship between majoritarian social norms, usually reinforced by religious institutions and the law, and oppressed social groups.

The dominant position among political philosophers addressing the question of the proper role of religion in the public sphere is that the secular state cannot insist on its traditional requirements given the diversification of immigration and the transformation of religious beliefs in contemporary democracies. It is concluded that, in its traditional conception, the secular state is unable to deal with diversity. As a response to this diagnosis, philosophers have developed more flexible interpretations of the requirements of secularism and therefore have made the separation between politics and religion more permeable.

In the dissertation I argue that such developments do indeed address some of the challenges deep religious and cultural pluralism raise to democracies. However, I argue that they leave some important issues unaddressed, particularly in societies where there is a politically and socially influential religious institution that claims to be representative of the religious and cultural identities of the majority of the population. I analyze cases in which new expressions of moral pluralism challenge consolidated social

norms and their respective crystallizations into legislation. Hence, the fundamental question the dissertation addresses is:

What is required by the commitment to protect pluralism in cases where social groups are oppressed by social norms that are reinforced by the majority, the law, or powerful religious institutions?

Pluralism emerges as a consequence of at least two social phenomena. On the one side, diversification of immigration physically assembles religions and cultures from all over the world; and, on the other side, the free development of new moral worldviews, accompanied by the—slow—social acceptance of such views. Both of them seem to challenge the grounding basis of the liberal idea of toleration, for they depart from the assumptions of a common Christian root and the acceptance of the public-private divide.

When it is focused on the first social phenomenon, the debate about the role of religion in the public sphere has been addressed as a question about whether and how to extend rights to equal freedom of conscience to the new religious and cultural expressions of pluralism. Thus, the so-called crisis of secularism refers mainly to the failed attempt of western states to properly respond to claims from immigrants of non-Christian origins. In contrast, when it is focused on the second social phenomenon, the debate has been addressed in terms of the nature of the reasons individuals can legitimately bring into political deliberations. This branch of the debate has focused on the epistemic aspects of reason-giving processes in a context of reasonable pluralism. From this point of view, the crisis of (liberal) secularism consists in the inability to give religious citizens due respect.

In this dissertation I focus on the public and political opposition the Catholic Church displays against advancements seeking transformations of social and legal norms. In particular, the focus is on cases in which social and legal norms are supported by powerful and majoritarian institutions (e.g. the Roman Catholic Church in southern Europe) and on how they interact with 'new' expressions of pluralism.