Configured for Exclusion: Characterizations of Religion in Liberal Political Philosophy

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Abstract
Some liberal political philosophers argue for the necessary exclusion, in principle, of religious traditions from involvement in the political sphere, based on a characterization of "religion" as something inappropriately involved in democratic participation. This paper specifically examines Robert Audi’s implicit justifications for the separation of religion from politics in Religious Commitments and Secular Reason. Audi’s justifications depend on two different and competing characterizations of "religion." On the one hand, he sometimes portrays religion as something essentially authoritarian and fascist. On the other hand, he sometimes portrays religion as something essentially apolitical and “spiritual.” In addition to the fact that these characterizations are contrary to one another, the corresponding justifications for the separation of religion from politics are faulty and self-contradictory. However, because these justifications are only implicit in the text, the contradictions do not manifest themselves, and Audi’s text remains rhetorically persuasive.

Keywords
Robert Audi, Politics and Religion, Liberalism, Political Philosophy, Separation of Religion from the State, Secularism, Definitions of Religion

Introduction
Why are the claims that arise from within religious traditions a problem for liberals? Recently I went to dinner with a colleague, and the topic of “gay marriage” came up. My colleague, defending gay marriage in a manner typical for liberals, professed to be confused that the matter was up for debate. He proceeded to explain to me something like the following: “I don’t understand what all the fuss is about. This is a very simple matter. America’s First Amendment guarantees a wall of separation between church and state. Because the
arguments against gay marriage are religious, they ought to be barred from influencing legislation. Religious people cannot impose their values on all other citizens in a secular state." For him, the opposition between "secular" and "religious" was simple and straightforward, and anything associated with the latter in principle ought to have nothing to do with the state's regulation of marriage.

The thesis of this essay is that my colleague's sort of argument depends upon and reinforces some strange and unhelpful ideas about religious institutions. Not only are these ideas about a normative "wall of separation" largely incoherent, but, insofar as they tend to characterize "private" religious institutions and state institutions as unrelated, they obscure the very real relationship between the two. Following Marx, Gramsci, Althusser, and others, I believe that there is inevitably a circular relationship of power between civil institutions and state institutions, even in liberal democracies wherein a so-called "separation of church and state" exists. The obfuscating conceptual apparatus that rhetorically opposes "religion" to "state" (or "private" to "public") must be demolished and cleared away before this circulation of power can be properly understood.

In addition, my colleague faces the following objection, leveled at him by those on the right. Given the principles of liberal democracy, according to which all citizens are encouraged to participate in the democratic process, are there legitimate reasons to exclude any and all "religious" reasons from public justification of legislation? If citizens involved in other apparently non-religious, yet partisan organizations are legally allowed to give reasons for the public justification of legislation, then why cannot those who are involved in religious institutions? Why is it that liberalism can welcome labor unions, women's rights groups, and environmental protection organizations to publicly lobby for their particular agendas, yet maintain that those who want to lobby for an agenda associated with a religious tradition are in principle excepted from democratic participation? Apart from an adequate justification for the exclusion of religious reasons from public reason, the liberal's exclusion of religion risks being random, arbitrary, or merely prejudicial.

Although I am in full agreement with liberal theorists that the demands of justice call for the legalization of gay marriage, I am uncertain that the religious/secular opposition they employ is sustainable. This essay will therefore investigate the following question. How is "religion" a special case for liberalism? That is, are citizens who rely on religious reasons for their favored legislation any different from citizens who rely on other sorts of reasons for their favored legislation? Many liberal theorists defend the claim that religion