“Should religion be evicted from the public square?”

by:

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SHOULD RELIGION BE EVICTED FROM THE PUBLIC SQUARE?
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FROM THE PUBLIC SQUARE?

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In North America a pink slip in your pay-packet means you’ve been fired. My original title for this paper was “Is religion a ‘pink slip’ in the public square?” – that is, are some voices and views being dismissed simply on the basis that they are religious? When I proposed this title to Arthur Escamilla, the Dean of Warrane College, he informed me that in Australia a “pink slip” means that your car has been certified as roadworthy. So, it didn’t quite fit, even for me who loves finding imaginative connections among apparently unconnected “entities”, which can provide otherwise unavailable insights. Consequently, I changed the title to “Is religion being evicted from the public square?”. But, no matter how we ask it, the response to this question in secular Western democracies over the last twenty or so years has been, not only, that religion is being banished from the public square, but also, and increasingly commonly, there is a resounding affirmation by an increasing number of people that it should be so banished. In other words, some voices and views are being dismissed from the public square, simply because they are religious.\(^1\) Indeed, many of the people seeking to evict religion are, not only, openly hostile to any such participation, but also, openly hostile to religion, itself.

Observing this hostility leads to many other questions, the primary one being, “Are these people evicting religion doing the right thing?” My response is an absolute “No”, and I hope to convince you, if that is not already your stance, that it should be.

I want to look at the arguments \textit{against} religious voices having a valid claim to be heard in the public square. What are these arguments? Where do they originate? Why are they being presented? And what are the arguments \textit{for} religious voices having a valid claim, or even a right, to be heard in the public square?

\(^1\) I was recently asked by an editor at a Canadian newspaper for which I write as a freelancer, to draft a commentary article responding to the question “What do I believe is currently the world’s most dangerous idea?” (This article is attached as an appendix.) I was curious to know what my colleagues and friends would say. All of those I asked said “religion”. I don’t agree, but that is a discussion for another occasion.
1. WHAT ISSUES ARE BEING DEBATED IN THE CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC SQUARE?

In ethics it’s a truism, but no less important for being so, that “good facts are essential to good ethics”. So, let’s start with some facts. What are some of the issues currently being debated in the public square?

Whether you live in Australia, Canada or another Western democracy, if you read the newspapers, listen to documentaries on radio or watch the news on TV you’ll see numerous reports on topics such as: euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide; withdrawal of life-support treatment; treatment of seriously disabled new-born babies; access to health care, especially expensive new treatments; abortion; prenatal genetic screening; assisted human reproduction technologies; reproductive tourism; sperm and ova donation; surrogate motherhood; “designer babies” – “savior siblings”; cloning; human embryo stem cell research; same-sex marriage; artificial sperm and ova - making embryos from two same-sex adults; polygamy; sex education of children; the use of animals in research; manimals” – embryos with both human and animal genes; synthetic biology; xenotransplantation – the use of animal organs in humans; transplant tourism; being soft/hard on crime and drugs; needle exchange clinics; safe injecting sites; capital punishment; law and ethics governing armed conflict; the ethics of robotic warfare; business ethics; corruption; environmental ethics; aid to developing countries; and so on.

These issues involve some of our most important individual and collective social-ethical-legal values. That is true, in part, because many of them are connected with respect for life, and with birth or death, the two events around which we have always formed our most important individual and collective values. Those values, together with our principles, attitudes, beliefs, myths and so on, make up the societal-cultural paradigm on which our society is based – that is, the “shared story” that we tell each other and buy into in order to form the glue that binds us as a society.

So, in “secular societies” such as Australia and Canada, does religion have any valid role to play in determining what these values should be?

Let’s look, first, at the nature of the conflicts we are experiencing with respect to the values that we should adopt.
2. VALUES CONFLICTS

What our collective values should be is currently a source of conflict – some call it “culture wars”. These wars are often described as having two sides doing battle: a traditional, conservative, often religious side versus a post-modern, liberal, moral relativist, often secularist side. This division into two well-defined camps can be useful as a shorthand way to discuss these values issues, but it is an oversimplification, especially in relation to many of our current values issues, such as those I listed, viewed as packages.

Many variations in what constitutes one person’s “values package” as compared with another person’s package are possible. And it merits noting, here, that there is no one monolithic religious voice or, indeed, secular voice, rather, each of these two broad groupings is also a collection of many different voices. In other words, the reality is far more mixed and complex than two “camps”, and it’s important to recognize this as it tells us that although we might disagree with “the other side” on some issues, we can agree with them on others.

That recognition is also important because, as I will propose, I believe searching for those agreements – what I call searching for a “shared ethics” – is crucial in pluralistic, multicultural, multi-religious, secular, post-modern, democratic societies like Australia and Canada, to finding a values structure that will allow each of us as individuals and all of us as a society to flourish in the sense of realizing the fullness of our human spirit.²

The idea is to find what we have in common ethically so that we can experience ourselves as belonging to the same moral community. As those experiences accumulate we will be more able to find common ground than we can in any other way. But to do that will require the presence of goodwill and the absence of hostility towards religion and religious people and their views in the public square.

Some people question whether there is such hostility. A relatively recent expression of concern about its presence and the absence of such goodwill comes from American theologian, George Weigel, writing about a seminar for young Catholic Europeans held in Poland:

“What these young people ... know... is that they are coming to Catholic maturity in a Europe increasingly hostile to public manifestations of Catholic faith. When the Tertio Millennio Seminar started in 1992, our debates were about church-state law, democratic theory, and the structure of the free economy; now, they're about the nature of marriage, the challenge of biotechnology, the life issues, Islam, and an aggressive secularism that tries to keep religiously informed moral argument out of the European public square. ... [We need] to help shape a lay leadership in these new democracies that can develop the voice of religiously informed public moral argument. The task is a huge one.”

Note that the hostility that Weigel describes arises around precisely many of the same issues that I listed at the beginning of this paper.

To understand and deal with this hostility, we have, first, to have some understanding of how those opposed to religious values in the public square view religion.

Addressing the theme “Free to Believe? A Religious Conscience in a Secular Society”, Professor Roger Trigg, Academic Director of the Centre for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Kellogg College, Oxford, is reported as noting that “religious viewpoints are frequently not respected or even accommodated. He said that European authorities are inclined to see religion as a threat that must be controlled. “What is developing is not neutrality but often hostility to religion, with an ideology of human rights taking its place,” he said. I am an advocate of respect for human rights, but, as I will explain shortly, I believe it is a mistake to promote those rights to the exclusion of the religiously informed conscience of those who have such. [The report continued:] Similarly, Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali, former Anglican Bishop of Rochester, England, has warned that aggressive secularism is leading to an “encroaching totalitarianism” that has become a threat to freedom of conscience.”

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3. THE NEED TO CROSS DIVIDES: 
ABANDONNING “EITHER/OR”

We need to be able to cross our traditional divides if we are to find some shared ethics in relation to issues such as I identified at the beginning of this paper. And when those divides are places of serious conflict, we must try even harder to find what we share and where we can agree. That is, not only can we, but we must, cross the secular/religious divide, the science/religion divide and the divide between religions, if we are to find a “shared ethics” in our world.5

The starkest examples of refusals to cross these divides are the fundamentalist religious people and the fundamentalist neo-atheists, such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, Michel Onfray, Sam Harris and so on. I believe they are all seriously misguided, but let’s look at the latter group.6

Like all fundamentalists the neo-atheists, first, want to impose their views on everyone else. One of the most egregious current examples, which is an extension and putting into practice of their “religion has no place in the public square” approach, is that physicians have no right to respect for their freedom of conscience and their ethical and moral values.

In stark contrast to fostering such respect, here’s the Ontario Human Rights Commission’s startling view of a physician’s obligation in the physician-patient encounter: “It is the Commission’s position that doctors, as providers of services that are not religious in nature [such as abortion], must essentially ‘check their personal views at the door’ in providing medical care.” The commission makes clear that physicians’ “personal views” include their deepest and most important ethical and moral beliefs and values. In other words, this is a directive to physicians to “park your ethics and values with your car outside the surgery”. And the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario warned that failure to do so could result in legal liability for discrimination or loss of a licence to practice medicine.7

5 Somerville, supra note 2.
Second, like all fundamentalists, the neo-atheists take an either/or approach – either my beliefs or yours; either science or religion, either reason or Faith - when we need to accommodate both sides of each of these divides. Fundamentalists, whether secular or religious, then seek to reconcile what they see as the conflicts between the two elements that make up each of these pairings, by dropping one or the other of them. Richard Dawkins’ call for the elimination of religion, except as a purely private pursuit, demonstrates such a choice on his part.

And, third, they engage in proselytizing in an effort to do so. The advertising slogan, “There’s probably is no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life,” on buses in Britain and Canada, is an example that attracted a great deal of media and public attention. Most recently, the New York City Atheists have some two dozen buses rolling through Manhattan, with a 12-foot long, three foot high message, "You don’t have to believe in god to be a moral or ethical person".

One problem with this approach is that proposing that science and religion or reason and faith are in conflict is not neutral in terms of its impact on finding a “shared ethics”; it’s very harmful to attaining that goal.

The neo-atheists would like to reduce religion to nothing more than a personal fantasy or superstition. But that’s not realistic. It’s an impossible dream on their part. At best it will fail, at worst it will do serious harm – it will exacerbate the acrimony of the values conflicts and make it more likely, not less likely, that religion will become a focus of serious conflict. Also, because culture and religion are linked, even within democratic multicultural pluralistic Western societies it will increase the number and intensity of the current values clashes and may contribute to culture wars.

And it’s essential to recognize that, like the fundamentalist neo-atheists, fundamentalist religious people, especially those who act militantly in what they see as “the cause of their Faith”, also make finding a shared ethics, at best, much more difficult.

One way of trying to cross some of our current divides would be to see whether might we be able to find some ethical universals that are common to all people whether or not they are religious and, if so, no matter which religion they espouse. Might we able to say that these ethical universals are so widely shared over such a long period of time across so many different cultures that they can be taken as characteristics of being human — that is, they are innate to being human?
And might the various religions be one source of the shared ethics wisdom that we seek? For instance, some version of the Golden Rule is to be found in all major world religions. Some scholars – theologians, philosophers and religious studies academics - are looking at a range of world religions and analyzing their relation to human rights declarations. And some secular philosophers, for instance, German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, are suggesting, as a possibility for finding some common ethics ground, a concept of an “ethics of the [human] species”\(^8\), which, I suggest, might have an epigenetic base.\(^9\) I’d call this concept “human ethics”.

And it’s not only our traditional divides that we need to be concerned about.

American author, Colleen Carroll Campbell, provides an important insight in relation to creating contemporary divides in the public square. She describes “the quintessential modern impulse [as being]... to separate -- to sever faith from reason, morality from politics, and spirituality from community and history”.\(^10\)

The elements she names are all “human ways of knowing”. We urgently need to stop separating them and, rather, to accommodate, reintegrate and use all them, if we are to make wise and ethical decisions about the values we espouse.\(^11\)

Now, let’s look at what we mean by a secular society.

### 4. SECULAR SOCIETIES

By a secular society I specifically do not mean a society in which religious and spiritual voices are excluded from the public sphere. As I’ve explained already, I do not agree with the secularist argument that religion has no valid role in our shared values formation and has no place in the public square, or at least nothing valuable to contribute, or certainly nothing valuable beyond the purely private sphere. But, at the same time, I recognize that religion cannot function in the public square in the same way as it did in the past.

\(^9\) See infra and Somerville, supra note 2.
\(^10\) Colleen Carroll Campbell, *A Legacy of Connection and Common Ground in a Fragmented World*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 15, 2009
\(^11\) Somerville, supra note 2.
We form society through a journey of the collective human imagination.

In an article in the Globe and Mail,\textsuperscript{12} journalist Michael Valpy quotes American political scientist Benedict Anderson to the effect that “a nation is an imagined community”. Valpy points out that we have to understand our fellow citizens with whom we interact, and “share values, community knowledge and mythology”, if we are to hear and understand each other. And doing that is “what enables Canadians to live together with sufficient levels of trust and security and to conduct their democracy under the rubric of having a common purpose and serving the common good.” The problems are that we can no longer assume a shared knowledge - “the cohesive core of common information is shrinking” - and we are becoming more polarized in our attitudes, and that’s undermining social cohesion.

In the past, a given group or society found their collective human imagination and undertook the journey of their collective human imagination through religion. In other words, among other functions, a shared religion was used to create and carry the community’s collective imagination.

To state the obvious, this situation has changed in two ways: First, in our post-modern interconnected world, the collectivity involved in searching for a shared ethics is everyone, not just one, more or less, homogenous, isolated community.

Now the entire world - literally - is, in some senses, although certainly not all, our local community. And, of course, we do not have a universally shared religion in either our national or global communities. Moreover, in addition to our myriad of religious traditions, some of us are not religious and some of the latter are militantly anti-religious, just as some religious people are, sadly, militantly religious.

So, if we cannot use religion to find our collective imagination and bind ourselves together, how then do we do that? Can, as fundamentalist neo-atheists propose, a purely secular approach replace religion in fulfilling this need? Can an approach that expressly excludes religious voices do so?

I have long pondered why fundamentalist neo-atheists are so passionate about their disbelief.\textsuperscript{13} Why aren’t they just indifferent to religion and people who are

\textsuperscript{12} Michael Valpy, “Is this the end of the age of our social cohesion?”, \textit{The Globe and Mail}, August 29, 2009, A17

\textsuperscript{13} Margaret Somerville, “Why are atheists so passionate about disbelief?”, \textit{The Globe and Mail}, November 16, 1996, D2
religious? Hate is not the opposite of love - both are similar passions, but of opposite emotional content - indifference is the opposite of both.

I’ve spoken about epigenetics elsewhere. Most recently, I’ve been hypothesizing that humans’ search for spirituality might have a genetic base and be an epigenetic phenomenon – that is, the genetic base must be imprinted (activated) by an environmental trigger. If so, it would not be surprising that humans experience an inner space that needs to be filled and if not filled by religion in its traditional mode then it will need to be filled by something else that can function in a similar manner.

I suggest that atheism is one example of what religious studies scholars Katherine Young and Paul Nathanson have called “secular religions”, and atheists’ passion about it could show that we have a need for some form of powerful belief (or disbelief) in order to find meaning in life.

The word religion comes from re...ligare – to bind together. We might need to bind together to experience transcendence – the feeling of belonging to something larger than ourselves – an experience which we could require if we are to find meaning in life. Values surveys have found that a longing for transcendence is a rapidly escalating phenomenon in our intensely individualistic Western societies.

And today, much more than in the past, we humans need to bind together across our differences to form a society. Doing that is a major challenge even just within our local or national societies in the West, as they become more and more internally diverse. One response could be the emergence of secular religions.

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15 I hasten to note that I am not a genetic reductionist and am not suggesting that spirituality or being religious is nothing more than a hard-wired expression of certain genetic characteristics. Rather, it might be that we have genes that cause us to seek to experience spirituality – just as we have genes that allow us to know of our other essential human needs, for instance, that we are hungry or thirsty.

Secular religions...17

It’s indisputably true that humanism and atheism function as secular religions binding their adherents through common belief and ideology. They are expressed as secularism, which, more and more, has become “aggressive secularism”.

Science can also function as a secular religion and does so when it becomes scientism. The same is true of ethics when it becomes moralism. It’s also true, I believe, of sport, when it becomes sportism, especially when that is combined with another powerful “ism”, nationalism. And environmentalism is at least a secondary religion for more and more people – but even that has its disbelievers and critics! And I’ve been told that in the last census some Australians listed Jedi as their religion. I will leave how that should be classified as an open question. In short, we are witnessing the emergence of a very large number and range of secular religions.

None of these “isms” is harmful in itself, but they are harmful to finding a shared ethics when they are promoted – as, for instance, Dawkins does with scientism - to deny any space for spirituality and traditional religion in the public square and replace those with secularism, the most encompassing secular religion that functions as a basket holding all the others.

In other words, I am arguing that it’s a mistake to accept that secularism is neutral, as its advocates claim – it’s not. It too is a belief system used to bind people together. And if, despite being a belief system, secularism is not excluded from the public square, then religious voices should not be excluded on that basis. The mistake is in taking a disjunctive (either secularism or religion) approach to a situation that requires a conjunctive (both this and that, secularism and religion) approach. We need all voices to be heard in the democratic public square.

Secular democratic societies...

The basic principles on which democracy is founded are liberty and equality.

At its best, the genius of democracy is that it functions by allowing us to live peacefully together despite our differences, by enabling us to find where we can

17 See Somerville, supra note 6
agree and to hold in creative tension, rather than destructive tension, the issues we disagree about. To privilege secularism, as its advocates argue should be done, is to contravene the liberty and equality principles of democracy and to prevent democracy functioning as it should - in short it's profoundly anti-democratic.

As an aside, I’d like to focus for a moment on the possible benefits of living with such tension, by quoting French philosopher Remi Brague. Speaking of Western civilization he says:

"[It] is something very strange and unusual. Most civilizations have only one centre. Islam has Mecca. Ancient Egypt had Memphis. Babylon had Babylon. But Western civilization had two sources, Athens and Jerusalem—the Jewish and later Christian tradition and that of pagan antiquity—often described as being in dynamic conflict. This opposition is founded on the opposition of Jew and Greek, borrowed from Saint Paul, which was then systemized in different ways: Hellenism versus Hebraism, the religion of beauty versus the religion of obedience, reason versus faith, aesthetics versus ethics, etc. The curious thing is that one was never swallowed by the other. Europe is neither Jewish nor Greek. In "Rome" in Christianity (e.g., the Roman Catholic Church), Jerusalem and Athens are simultaneously joined and kept apart.

With the coming of Christianity the preceding cultures were not destroyed, but a new civilization was formed. As the Romans recognized that their culture was "secondary" to that of the Greeks, the Christians recognized that Judaism preceded Christianity. This understanding gave European civilization a unique openness and humility towards the enormous cultural achievements of the past. This humility has been a great strength. It fosters the awareness that you cannot simply inherit a civilizing tradition, but that you must work very hard to obtain it—to control the barbarian inside. This has given European culture the possibility of renaissances: a renewed appreciation of the sources of our culture, to correct what has gone wrong."18

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But, to return to the discussion of secular societies, let me be clear: We are secular, democratic societies and there is rightly a separation of Church and State. The question is: What does respecting that separation require?

Separation of Church and State means the state, and its laws and public and social policy, are not based directly on religious beliefs and laws as, for example, in Islamic societies such as Iran.¹⁹

The doctrine is meant to protect the state from being controlled or wrongfully interfered with by a religion or religions, and to protect religions, within their valid sphere of operation, from state interference or control. For instance, the Chinese government’s interference in the appointment of Roman Catholic bishops in the country contravenes the doctrine of separation of church and state. The doctrine of separation of church and state can be viewed as having division of powers or demarcation of jurisdictions functions.

Those wanting to exclude religion from the public square have created confusion among: Freedom of religion; freedom for religion; and freedom from religion. Freedom of religion – the state does not impose a religion on its citizens - there is no state religion. Freedom for religion – the state does not restrict the free practice of religion by its citizens. Freedom from religion – the state excludes religion and religious voices from the public square, in particular, in relation to law and public policy making. The first two freedoms are valid expressions of the doctrine of the separation of church and state. The third is not.

This mistaken interpretation of the doctrine of “separation of church and state” has been promoted by secularists in order to win a victory for their values in the culture wars by eliminating consideration of the values of their opponents by excluding those opponents on the basis that their views are religiously based.

**Should moral values based on religious beliefs be excluded?...**

So, should moral values based on religious beliefs - as compared with religious voices or religious beliefs - be excluded from the public square, as some secularists argue?

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¹⁹ I wish to make it very clear here, although I do not address the issue in this paper, that I consider a nation state based just on religion equally unacceptable and dangerous as one based just on secular principles and beliefs.
For many people, their moral reasoning is connected with their religious beliefs. To exclude them and their moral views from the public square, because of the source of their beliefs, would be to disenfranchise them.

In Chamberlain v. Surrey School District, Mr. Justice Mackenzie, writing for a unanimous Court of Appeal for British Columbia, interpreted what subsections 76(1) and (2) of the School Act, that read as follows, required:

ss.76 (1) All schools must be conducted on strictly secular and non-sectarian principles.

(2) The highest morality must be inculcated, but no religious dogma or creed is to be taught in a school or Provincial school.

The respondents had challenged a resolution, passed by the Board of Trustees of the Surrey School District, establishing that three books not be approved as learning resources for kindergarten students. The books were about same-sex families and the respondents claimed the resolution withholding approval of the books was based on the trustees religious beliefs and so offended the “strictly secular and non-sectarian principles” and the “no religious dogma or creed” requirements of the act.

The court first made a “distinction between religion and morality”:

“A moral proposition may originate from a religious insight, but religion is more than morality and moral positions are not necessarily derived from religion. ... [R]eligion and morality are not synonymous terms. ... [M]oral positions [whether secularly or religiously based] taken as positions of conscience are entitled to full participation in the dialogue in the public square where moral questions are answered as a matter of law and social policy. ... There is no bright line between a religious and a non-religious conscience. Law may be concerned with morality, but the sources of morality in conscience are outside the law’s range and should be acknowledged from a respectful distance. ... Moral positions must be accorded equal access to the public square without regard to religious influence. A religiously informed

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21 School Act, R.S.B.C. 1996, c. 412
conscience should not be accorded any privilege, but neither should it be placed under a disability. In a truly free society moral positions advance or retreat in their influence on law and public policy through decisions of public officials who are not required to pass a religious litmus test. ...

Today, adherents of non-Christian religions and persons of no religious conviction are much more visible in the public square than a century ago and any truly free society must recognize and respect this diversity in its public schools. “Strictly secular and non-sectarian” must be interpreted in a manner that respects this reality. That respect precludes any religious establishment or indoctrination associated with any particular religion in the public schools, but it cannot make religious unbelief a condition of participation in the setting of the moral agenda. ...“[S]trictly secular” in the School Act can only mean pluralist in the sense that moral positions are to be accorded standing in the public square irrespective of whether the position flows out of a conscience that is religiously informed or not. The meaning of strictly secular is thus pluralist or inclusive in its widest sense.”

On appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada, Justice Gonthier (in dissent), but writing on a point of unanimous agreement for all nine judges, ruled that

... nothing in the [Canadian] Charter [of Rights and Freedoms], political or democratic theory, or a proper understanding of pluralism demands that atheistically based moral positions trump religiously based moral positions on matters of public policy. I note that the preamble to the Charter itself establishes that ‘... Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law.’ According to Saunders J. [of the British Columbia Supreme Court where the case was heard at trial], if one’s moral view manifests from a religiously grounded faith, it is not to be heard in the public square, but if it does not, then it is publicly acceptable. The problem with this approach is that everyone has ‘belief’ or ‘faith’ in something, be it atheistic, agnostic or religious. To construe ‘secular’ as the realm of the ‘unbelief’ is therefore erroneous. Given this, why, then, should the religiously informed conscience be placed at public disadvantage or disqualification? To

\[\text{22 Supra note 20.}\]
do so would be to distort liberal principles in an illiberal fashion and
would provide only a feeble notion of pluralism. The key is that
people will disagree about important issues, and such
disagreement, where it does not imperil community living, must be
capable of being accommodated at the core of modern pluralism.\textsuperscript{23}

To summarize, to exclude from public square debates arguments about moral
values that are based on religious beliefs would be a disaster, just as excluding
the arguments that are based on secularist values would be. Religion brings to
bear important considerations that secularism doesn’t, and vice versa. We need
to hear both sides and give proper weight to each, if we are to make wise
decisions about the values that should take priority, when values are in conflict.
And, as I explained, to exclude either set of arguments is anti-democratic.

The role of moral reasoning in the public square...

So, what functions does and should moral reasoning play in the public square?
Jennifer Marshall, from the DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society at the
Heritage Foundation, argues that moral reasoning is foundational to democracy.
Here’s how she describes the link between moral reasoning and democracy:

“The Founders [of the United States] thought moral reasoning was a
prerequisite for a self-governing people. In the Constitution, they
designed a system that presumes we are capable of deliberating
together about what is good.

By appealing to shared concepts of the common good, we ensure
our exercise in democratic self-rule is a matter of reasoned
discourse rather than raw political muscle, the triumph of strong
over weak.

Morality and reasoned discourse are essential to safeguarding
individual liberties and basic human rights -- and make tolerance
possible. Refusal to rely on reasoned discourse creates both ugly
spectacle and dangerous precedent.”\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{24} Jennifer Marshall, “Culture wars and the political future of the US”,
http://www.mercatornet.com/articles/view/culture_wars_and_the_political_future_of_the_u.s/
Some politicians interpret the doctrine of separation of Church and State to claim that their own personal views on what is and is not moral have no place in politics, often in order to avoid standing up for what they believe is morally right, or to avoid opposing what they believe is morally wrong, when they think that will lose them votes. That means they believe, as Michael Cook, editor of Mercatornet.com puts it, “that morality and politics have little to do with each other. In fact, political expediency should trump moral truths”.\(^{25}\) Surely, this is not a position that should be reassuring to the citizens whom these politicians represent, including in making decisions about issues that will affect our most important shared values.

In an obituary for the late Father John Neuhaus, a highly respected American public intellectual, Colleen Carroll Campbell provides an excellent description of the contribution that religious voices can make in the democratic public square:

“The political liberalism that Neuhaus championed was one rooted in moral truth and open to the transcendent perspective of religious faith. When liberalism loses that foundation, Neuhaus argued, democracy falters and human rights are imperiled. Politics ceases to be the deliberation about how we ought to order our life together. It becomes instead a brutal contest in which who’s weak and who’s strong matter more than who’s right and who’s wrong.

Neuhaus saw this perversion of democratic ideals dominating what he famously labeled "the naked public square," a secularized civic realm in which religious voices are unwelcome and an all-powerful state eventually arrogates to itself the authority to decide the values by which we will live. In writings that married intellectual gravitas with razor-sharp wit, Neuhaus labored to advance an antidote for the naked public square: "a religiously informed public philosophy" that respects both the religious character of Americans and the demands of a pluralistic society.”\(^{26}\)


\(^{26}\) Colleen Carroll Campbell, “A Legacy of Connection and Common Ground in a Fragmented World”, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 15, 2009
5. WAYS OF EVICTING RELIGIOUS VOICES FROM THE PUBLIC SQUARE

It is instructive to look at the strategies of people who want to exclude religious voices from the public square. We could call these ways of evicting religious voices from the public square. They are not mutually exclusive, overlap and are often used cumulatively.

First, secularists deal with religious people to suppress their voices or views by using *ad hominem* attacks. A “derogatorily label the person and dismiss them on the basis of that label” approach is intentionally used as a strategy to suppress strong arguments against any secularist stance and, also, to avoid needing to deal with the opposing arguments.

Examples include a straight out *ad hominem* attack. For instance, in response to an article of mine in the Ottawa Citizen on societal factors that might favour legalizing euthanasia, Joe Agnost wrote: “Why anyone would give this horrible woman a voice is beyond me! Margaret Somerville is so out of touch with reality it’s pretty scary... thankfully she has NO influence beyond the occasional (deluded) article in a newspaper. I really do wish she’d shut up though!” And yet another example in response to an opinion I was invited to contribute to the Globe and Mail (one of Canada’s national newspapers) on patient’s rights to privacy and confidentiality of their medical records, a topic which has nothing to do with homosexuality, “Montreal’s shame is back! Margaret homophobe Somerville, who should NEVER be printed in any serious newspaper.”

Labeling persons as religious and, therefore, their views as irrelevant is also common – again, the persons are dismissed on this basis, rather than dealing with their arguments. In another comment article I recently published in the on-

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line Globe and Mail\textsuperscript{31}, I argued for the importance of children’s biological ties to their parents and doing the least damage possible to these. This argument was unpopular with people, such as those who support same-sex marriage, who believe that what constitutes a family is simply a matter of adults’ personal preferences. Here is one response to that article: “Any chance that Dr. Somerville is a Catholic? If so, she should at least state it in her opinion pieces and not hide behind her ivory tower. Oh, and Doctor, you lost the argument on same-sex marriage. Kinda pathetic you’re using this issue to re-argue it.” \textsuperscript{32}

In light of such attacks, the decision of the editors of some of the world’s leading medical journals to require that authors reveal their religious affiliations in their conflict of interest disclosures can be seen as surprising and probably not wise.\textsuperscript{33}

Some politically correct positions, but not all by any means, conflict with some people’s religious and moral beliefs. But whatever the basis for people disagreeing with a politically correct stance, they and their arguments are excluded simply by labeling them as politically incorrect. Those who challenge a politically correct stance are automatically branded as intolerant, bigots or hatemongers. The substance of their arguments against the politically correct stance is not addressed; rather, they, themselves, are attacked as being intolerant and hateful simply for making those arguments and dismissed on that basis. In short, political correctness operates by shutting down non-politically correct people’s freedom of speech.\textsuperscript{34}

Similarly, while intense tolerance (which derives from the now ubiquitous moral relativism) is advocated, that tolerance is not extended to politically incorrect views; they are not tolerated. The façade of “tolerance” masks the intolerance involved and makes it difficult to object to political correctness as a suppression of freedom of speech, and also sometimes a suppression of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience.

As an aside, it’s interesting to note that in societies with largely homogenous values we used to have what can be called “universal truth” and very low levels of

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, Tendercomrade, Comments, 10/15/2009 3:17:49 PM
\textsuperscript{34} Margaret Somerville, “Facing up to the dangers of the intolerant university: Bird on an ethics wire”, in Ethics in the Academy, Academic Matters, May 2009, pp. 58-61
tolerance for any deviation from that. Now, with exceptions such as noted above, we have “universal tolerance” and very low levels of agreement on “truth”.35

Another strategy is to characterize speech as a verbal act. It is important to understand the nature of this strategy: For example, speaking against abortion or same-sex marriage is not characterized as speech; rather, it is characterized as a sexist or discriminatory act against women or homosexuals, respectively, and, therefore, as, in itself, a breach of human rights or, even, a hate crime. Consequently, it is argued that protections of freedom of speech do not apply.

Another part of the same strategy is to reduce to two the choices of position that are available: One is either pro-choice on abortion and for respect for women and their rights or pro-life and against respect for women and their rights. The possibility of being pro-women and their rights and pro-life is eliminated. The same approach is taken to same-sex marriage: One is against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and for same-sex marriage, or against same-sex marriage and for such discrimination. The option of being against such discrimination and against same-sex marriage, as I am, is eliminated.36

6. PLACING SOCIAL-ETHICAL VALUES ISSUES IN A MORAL CONTEXT IN THE POLITICAL PUBLIC SQUARE

I suggest that the most important task of the religious voices in the public square is to place and keep social-ethical-values issues in a moral context. It’s a huge challenge, but crucial to maintaining ethics, in general, and with respect to issues such as I listed at the beginning of this paper, in particular. A purely secular approach to establishing our collective values creates serious risks that a moral context will be lost. That is true because a secular approach is usually based on utilitarian values and moral relativism, which can lead to a loss of a sense that a given issue raises moral concerns.

35 I am indebted to Professor Torrance Kirby, Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University, for this insight.
John Ralston Saul calls history “human memory”. It is one of our main “human ways of knowing”. Religion should be seen as an important holder of our “collective moral memory”, a memory we lose or ignore at our peril.

We can see what happens when an issue loses its moral context by looking at what has happened with abortion. Abortion is always a moral and ethical issue - or it should always be. The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Reverend Rowan Williams, writing in the English Sunday newspaper, The Observer, says however that we have lost our sense that abortion involves a “major moral choice” – it’s been “normalized” – “something has happened to our assumptions about the life of the unborn child ...when one third of pregnancies in Europe end in abortion”. In Canada, one quarter to one third of pregnancies end in abortion. Abortion has gone from being a rare exception to the norm.

So we must consider how can we place and keep issues such as abortion, euthanasia, new reproductive technologies, embryo stem cell research, and so on in a moral context. And we must try to imagine what will happen if we fail to do that.

Here’s how Jennifer Roback Morse, the president of the Ruth Institute in California, describes the impact of the loss of a moral context when we are deciding about such issues:

“I have talked with people who were adults when Roe v Wade legalized abortion in the United States. These people will usually say they did not expect there would be so many abortions. They envisioned that women would only choose abortions in the “hard cases” of rape and incest, not to the tune of a million abortions per year. These same people also admit they would never have anticipated the moral callousness that society has developed around the sanctity of human life. They thought the predictions of euthanasia, assisted suicide, infanticide, and sex selection abortion were hysterical fantasies of religious fanatics. But those wild-eyed religious fanatics proved to be sober-minded prophets.

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This back-story is worth keeping in mind as we think about the future of reproductive technology [in particular, the creation of “saviour siblings”, embryos selected for development on the basis that as a child they can be used to medically treat a sibling]. Proponents of the unlimited use of ART dismiss the fears of excesses as over-wrought and hysterical. But once we decide that it is morally acceptable to do “selective reduction” of embryos, why isn’t it even more acceptable to eliminate non-useful embryos before implantation in the womb? We have allowed ourselves to do pre-implantation genetic diagnosis for the purpose of screening out embryos that have medical conditions we don’t want to deal with. What could possibly be the problem, then, with “screening in” for a baby that has the traits we positively want, for whatever reason.”\(^39\)

We need to revalue religion, even if we are not people of Faith, to see it as a store of traditional knowledge and wisdom. Access to that knowledge and wisdom is more important than ever before in light of the possibilities opened up by the new technoscience, if we are to preserve the essence of our humanness, which requires protecting our most important social-ethical values, especially that of respect for life.

**7. WHAT FACTORS HAVE PRECIPITATED CLAIMS THAT VOICES BASED ON RELIGIOUS BELIEFS SHOULD BE EXCLUDED FROM THE PUBLIC SQUARE?**

We need to place the exclusion of religious voices from the public square in a larger context to understand how and why this has occurred. The current euthanasia debate provides a useful case study and is instructive in this regard. It also shows what can happen to our individual and collective values, if we take a purely secular approach unbalanced by religious views. The outcome should be of serious concern to all of us.

Let’s ask the question: Why now are our Australian and Canadian societies considering legalizing euthanasia? Not one of the bottom-line conditions usually linked with calls for legalizing euthanasia - that a person is terminally ill, wants to

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\(^{39}\) Jennifer Roback Morse, “My Sister’s Keeper”,
http://www.mercatornet.com/articles/view/my_sisters_keeper/

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die and we can kill them – is new. These factors have been part of the human condition for as long as humans have existed. And our capacity to relieve pain and suffering has improved remarkably. Why, then, are we now considering legalizing euthanasia (a term I use here to include assisted suicide)?

I suggest that the principal cause is profound changes in our post-modern, secular, western, democratic societies and their interactive and cumulative effects. As a neutral statement of fact, almost all of these changes are related in one way or another to a loss of religion in the public square. In saying that, I'm not proposing that religious voices should dominate in the public square or that secular ones should be excluded. Rather we need both in continuing and balanced interaction.

So let’s look at some of these changes in our Western secular societies, such as Australia and Canada, in relation to the current “hot issue” of euthanasia. Have they caused us to see euthanasia in a different light from in the past and, if so, in what way?

**Individualism:** “Intense individualism” (sometimes called “selfish individualism”), which needs to be distinguished from “healthy individualism”, dominates our societies - possibly, to the exclusion of any real sense of community even in connection with death and bereavement. The rise of intense individualism could be connected with the decline in religious belief. Religion involves relating to the Other and, through that relationship, to other humans. Intense individualism is much more likely to be present in the absence of those relationships.

Intense individualism entails giving pre-eminence to personal autonomy and self-determination, which favours the acceptance of euthanasia. Almost all the justifications for legalizing euthanasia focus primarily on the dying person who wants it. Its harmful impact on society and its values and institutions is ignored. Religious voices would rebalance this bias, which should be of concern to all of us.

In our society, death is largely a medical event that takes place in a hospital or other institution and is perceived as occurring in great isolation. It’s been

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40 This section is based on Margaret Somerville, *Death Talk: The Case against Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide*, McGill Queen’s University Press; Montreal, 2001, pp 433, Chapter 6, “Legalizing Euthanasia: Why Now?”, pp. 105-118, where relevant references can be found.
institutionalised, depersonalised, and dehumanized – and certainly de-spiritualized. Asking for euthanasia can be a response to “intense pre-mortem loneliness”. Again religious voices have a role to play in establishing approaches to help remedy this situation.

**Mainstream media:** The media are probably the most influential and important component of the contemporary public square. A major factor in the promotion of euthanasia is the mainstream media and it’s often difficult for religious voices to make themselves heard in the media.

Roger Alton, the former editor of The Independent, speaks of the hostility in the media to religion and growing level of intolerance. “The ceiling of respect has been breached.” Many journalists are highly individualistic, reject authority and what they see as paternalism, and often hostile to religion for those reasons. They identify opposition to euthanasia as a religious, “right wing”, “anti-choice”, conservative view, all characteristics from which they personally disidentify.

Religious voices that are anti-euthanasia have another barrier to being heard in the mainstream media. Their arguments include the harm to values, institutions and society legalizing euthanasia would cause and these arguments are very difficult to present visually. It makes dramatic, personally and emotionally gripping television to feature an articulate, courageous, forty-two-year-old, divorced woman, who is dying of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, begging to have euthanasia made available and threatening to commit suicide while she is still able - thus leaving her eight-year-old son even sooner - if she is refused access. This describes Sue Rodriguez, a Canadian woman who took her case for legal access to assisted-suicide to the Supreme Court of Canada, where she lost by the narrowest possible margin.\(^{41}\)

The arguments against euthanasia based on the harm that it would do to society, both present and future, are very much more difficult to present. They do not make dramatic and compelling television. Visual images are difficult to find. Viewers do not personally identify with these arguments that come across as just abstractions. Society cannot be interviewed on television and become a familiar, empathy-evoking figure to the viewing public. Moreover, the vast exposure to death that we are subjected to in both current-affairs and entertainment

programs might have overwhelmed our sensitivity to the awesomeness of death and, likewise, of inflicting it.

Ironically, the most powerful way in which the case against euthanasia has been presented on television is probably through the efforts of people such as Dr. Kevorkian to promote euthanasia and the revulsion they evoked in many viewers, including many of those who support euthanasia.

**Denial and control of death and “death talk”:** Ours are death-denying, death-obsessed societies. Those who no longer adhere to the practice of institutionalized religion have lost their main forums – churches, synagogues, temples, mosques, prayer houses - for engaging in “death talk.” As humans, we need to engage in this “talk” if we are to accommodate the inevitable reality of death into the living of our lives. And we must do that if we are to live fully and well.

Arguably, our extensive discussion of euthanasia in the mainstream media is an example of contemporary “death talk.” That means instead of being confined to an identifiable location and an hour a week, it has spilled out into our lives in general. This makes it more difficult to maintain the denial of death, because it makes the fear of death more present and “real.” One way to deal with this fear is to believe that we have death under control. The availability of euthanasia could support that belief. Euthanasia moves us from chance to choice concerning death. Although we cannot make death optional, we can create an illusion that it is, by making its timing and the conditions and ways in which it occurs a matter of choice.

**Fear**: We can be frightened not only as individuals, but also as a society. For instance, collectively, we express the fear of crime in our streets. But that fear, though factually based, might also be a manifestation of a powerful and free-floating fear of death, in general. We used to deal with this fear individually and collectively through religion. In an a-religious or anti-religion society, calling for the legalization of euthanasia could be a way of symbolically taming and civilizing death, thus reducing our fear of its random infliction through crime, that is, legalized euthanasia might function as, what social psychologists call, a “terror reduction” mechanism or “terror management” device.

If euthanasia were experienced as a way of converting death by chance to death by choice, it would offer a feeling of increased control over death and, therefore,
decreased fear. We tend to use law as a response to fear, often in the misguided belief that this will increase our control of that which frightens us and hence augment our safety.

**Legalism:** It is not surprising, therefore, that we have to varying degrees become legalistic societies. The reasons are complex and include the use of law as a means of ordering and governing a "society of strangers", as compared with one of "intimates". The latter is governed more by ethics and morality than law.

Matters such as euthanasia, which would once have been the topic of moral or religious discourse, are now explored in courts and legislatures – especially through concepts of individual human rights, civil rights, and constitutional rights. Religious voices often apply for intervener status in relevant court cases with varying success, or appear as witnesses before parliamentary committees, but, as noted previously, many politicians are frightened that they will lose votes or be publicly criticized if they appear to be in favour of the views put forward by religious voices in relation to social-ethical values issues and, therefore, they refrain from doing so.

Man-made law (legal positivism), as compared with divinely ordained law or natural law, has a very dominant role in establishing the values and symbols of a secular society. In the euthanasia debate, it does so through the judgements and legislation that result from the "death talk" that takes place in "secular cathedrals" - courts and legislatures.

Thus, it is to be expected that secularists who are trying to change society's values and symbols would see this debate as an opportunity to further their goals and, consequently, seek the legalization of euthanasia.

**Materialism and consumerism:** Another factor is that our societies are highly materialistic and consumerist. They have any sense of the sacred, even just of the "secular sacred". That too is connected with a loss of religion. Loss of a sense of the sacred favours a pro-euthanasia position, because that loss fosters the idea that worn-out people may be equated with worn-out products; both can then be seen primarily as "disposal" problems. As one Australian politician, Jeff Kennett, put it: "When you are past your best-before or use-by date, you should be disposed of as quickly, cheaply and efficiently as possible". Euthanasia implements that approach.
In contrast, most religious people see all human beings as having intrinsic human dignity, respect for which requires that we respect their lives, that is, we do not intentionally kill them as occurs in euthanasia.

**Mystery:** We are frightened of mystery, because we feel we don’t have control when faced with mysteries and we no longer have religion to turn to, in order to accommodate them. We convert mysteries into problems “to deal” with them and reduce our anxiety in so doing. If we convert the mystery of death into the problem of death, euthanasia (or, even more basically, a lethal injection) can be seen as a solution to that problem.

As can be seen in descriptions of death by euthanasia - for instance, that of a young man dying of AIDS who had an extravagant, symbolic-laden party for his friends before committing suicide - euthanasia can also function as a substitute for the loss of death rituals, which we have abandoned with religion. And possibly, it can function as well to help people to avoid, at least partly, any sense of mystery.

A sense of mystery might be required also to “preserve room for hope.” Hopelessness – nothing to look forward to - is strongly associated with a desire for euthanasia. Again we can see a link with the loss of religion and a belief in the hereafter.

Rejection of any sense of mystery often correlates with a belief that reason (logical, cognitive, rational mentation) is the only valid way of human knowing, and a rejection of other ways, such as intuition, especially moral intuition, examined emotions, experiential knowledge and so on. Such an approach favours euthanasia – it can make logical sense, even though humans have a deep moral intuition against killing each other and we have thousands of years of history (human memory, as a way of knowing) in all kinds of societies that it is wrong to do so, except where it is unavoidable to save human life.

And a loss of a sense of mystery is almost certainly associated with the loss of a sense of the sacred, even if it’s just the “secular sacred”, in particular, in relation to human life, and the restrictions that respect for the sacredness of life entails.

**Impact of scientific advances:** Among the most important causes of our loss of a sense of the sacred, in general, and regarding human life, in particular, are our
extraordinary scientific progress and the mistaken view that science and religion are antithetical, causing many people to abandon religion.

New genetic discoveries and new reproductive technologies have given us a sense that we understand the origin and nature of human life and that, because we can, we may manipulate - or even "create" - life. Transferring these sentiments to the other end of life would support the view that euthanasia is acceptable.

As well, the paradigms used to structure knowledge, in general, have been influenced by this unprecedented new scientific knowledge. These paradigms have been the bases for new schools of thought that can be used to challenge traditional concepts – often ones based in religion - of what it means to be human and what is required to respect human life. Secular humanists are making just such challenges.

**Competing worldviews**: Though immensely important in itself, the debate over euthanasia might be a surrogate for yet another, even deeper, one. Which of two irreconcilable worldviews will form the basis of our societal and cultural paradigm?

According to one worldview, we are highly complex, biological machines, whose most valuable features are our rational, logical, cognitive functions. This worldview is in itself a mechanistic approach to human life. Its proponents support euthanasia, as being, in appropriate circumstances, a logical and rational response to problems at the end of life.

The other worldview (which for some people is expressed through religion, but can be, and possibly is for most people, held independently of religion, at least in a traditional or institutional sense) is that human life consists of more than its biological component, wondrous as that is. It involves a mystery - at least the "mystery of the unknown" - of which we have a sense through our intuitions, especially moral ones. It sees death as part of the mystery of life, which means that to respect life, we must respect death. Although we might be under no obligation to prolong the lives of dying people, we do have an obligation not to shorten their lives deliberately.

The euthanasia debate is a momentous one. It involves issues that range from the nature and meaning of human life to the most fundamental principles on which societies are based. This debate involves our individual and collective past (the ethical, legal, and cultural norms that have been handed down to us as members of families, groups, and societies); the present (whether we will change those
norms); and the future (the impact that this would have on those who come after us).

In debating euthanasia we need to ask many questions, but three of the most important are: Would legalization be most likely to help us or hinder us in our search for meaning in our individual and collective lives? How do we want our grandchildren and great grandchildren to die? And, in relation to human death, what "memes" (fundamental units of cultural information that are inherited by being passed from generation to generation) do we want to pass on?

The euthanasia debate would not only be impoverished, it would be dangerous in the absence of religious voices. And that’s just one example that is typical of the role people with values based on their religion must play in all the other social-ethical values debates.

8. WHAT DOES BEING HUMAN MEAN?

At the heart of many of the current debates on ethics, including in relation to euthanasia is the issue of whether humans deserve special respect as compared with animals or robots and whether we have absolute obligations to protect and preserve the essence of our humanness.

I believe we deserve special respect simply because we are human. But some people, many of them secular humanists, don’t agree that there’s anything intrinsically special about being human.

Rodney Brooks, a scientist specializing in artificial intelligence at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, criticizes the idea that human beings are “special” in any important way and therefore deserve respect of a different kind from machines or robots or, indeed, from animals which he, like Princeton animal rights philosopher Peter Singer, would not differentiate from humans in the kind of respect they are owed. So, they argue that if we see it as acceptable to euthanize our suffering dog or cat, likewise, we should be able to offer euthanasia to humans.

The traditional way in which we have expressed the belief and moral intuition that humans are special, and therefore deserve special respect, is through the concept of soul (for those who are religious in an Abrahamic tradition). For those who are not religious, we can do the same through the idea of a human spirit - a term I
use in a religiously neutral sense, in that it can be accepted by people who are not religious and those who are, and, if religious, no matter what their religion.

I define the human spirit as

the intangible, immeasurable, ineffable, numinous reality to which all of us need to have access to find meaning in life and to make life worth living. It’s a deeply intuitive sense of relatedness or connectedness to all life, especially other people, to the world, and to the universe in which we live; the metaphysical -- but not necessarily supernatural -- reality which we need to experience to live fully human lives.\(^\text{42}\)

In other words, the human spirit is the means through which we can experience transcendence and perhaps transformation and the possession of soul or human spirit is the way we establish a difference in kind, not just in degree, between humans and other living entities (wonder-inspiring as they are), and therefore a difference in the kind of respect owed to each.

But if we do not believe in a soul or that the human spirit means humans are different from other animals and machines, there is then no basis on which to argue humans deserve special respect. In the context of euthanasia, for example, that view is expressed in an argument, mentioned above, often put forward by euthanasia advocates: If your dog was suffering, out of compassion, you would euthanize him, so how can you justify not doing the same for another person? The short answer is, “We are not dogs”.\(^\text{43}\)

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, I would first like to summarize the main points of the message that I have tried to deliver in this text:

- Values conflicts cannot be solved by excluding religious voices from the public square. On the contrary, doing so is likely to exacerbate those conflicts.

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\(^{42}\) Somerville, supra note 2

\(^{43}\) See the appendix, “What is currently the world’s most dangerous idea?” for further discussion of this point.
To exclude religious voices from the public square is anti-democratic, just as excluding secular voices would be. Both have a right to be heard.

Religious voices have a valid and important role in decision making about social-ethical-legal values, the most important of which is to bring collective moral memory to bear on those decisions and, in doing so, to help to keep them in a moral context and help us to avoid moral callousness.

Finally, I would like to turn to physician and ethicist Dr. Edmund Pellegrino, a former chairman of the United States President’s Council on Bioethics, for insights about the nature of the conflict between religious and secular voices in the public square. In the last chapter of the council’s report on “Human Dignity and Bioethics” he writes:

“Two contrary, but not necessarily contradictory, world views will dominate the discourse in our post-secular civilization. Two images of human dignity compete for moral authority. One is the scientific, the other the religious. Neither is likely to capitulate to the other. Is a productive dialogue and dialectic between these two world views possible, and how is it to be conducted?

Extremists on both sides, militant atheists and intransigent dogmatists, insist there can be no common ground. More responsible proponents of both views hope for a productive dialogue and appeal to the necessity of a common ground in the public arena, even while metaphysical foundations remain disputed."44

In other words, Pellegrino is arguing that religion has a valid role in the public square, a role on an equal footing with what he calls the scientific, but I’d call the secular, worldview. I agree with him. To implement that duality, in practice, requires, however, recognizing that religion and science are not antithetical, but, rather, they are different “ways of human knowing” that give us access to different forms of knowledge. The challenge is how to convince those who oppose religious voices in the public square that they are making a mistake in seeking to exclude them, and if religious voices are admitted, as they have a right

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to be, how to structure and engage in the dialogue that needs to ensue. I leave those issues for another time.

We need to extend the scope of our analyses of contemporary social-ethical-values issues beyond an intense present to consider the needs and rights of future generations.

And we must “hold on trust” for them, not just our physical world, but our metaphysical one – the values, principles, beliefs, stories and so on that create and represent the “human spirit”, that which makes us human. Religious voices, not only, can help us to do that, but also, I believe, they are essential if we are to achieve that goal, and nothing is more important than that we do.
WHAT’S PRESENTLY

THE WORLD’S MOST DANGEROUS IDEA?

Newspaper editors can dream up the most challenging questions. Wrestling with difficult questions is routine work for ethicists, but some are much more difficult than others. In the last while, editors have asked me for articles responding to three that fall in the former category:

- “What do I believe is presently the world’s most dangerous idea?”
- “How do I think the human race will end?”
- “What will future generations see as the defining event of the first decade of the 21st century?”

I also dreamt up a related question of my own, as a result of being asked by the Montreal McGill Alumnae to accompany their book club members to a sneak preview of the film of Kazuo Ishiguro’s book, “Never Let Me Go”, and later lead a discussion about it. The film is a science-fiction story, very unusually set in the past. It portrays the lives of group of people from their 1960’s childhood to their 1980’s - 1990’s young adulthood, who are clones destined to be killed in serving as organ donors for their wealthy progenitors. My question was:

- “What ethics lessons can we learn from this spine-chilling, heart-wrenching story that we need to apply now, if we are to ensure that our new science does not end up creating a dystopia, a world in which no reasonable person would want to live?”

What is interesting – and frightening - about these questions, looked at as a group, is that, in one way or another, they all involve the use of technology to intervene on humans in one way or another, and what we see is that doing so can involve the depersonalization or dehumanization of the people on whom the
interventions are carried out. It merits keeping in mind that it’s been said that “not seeing humans as humans is the root of all evil”.

My answer to the first question, “What do I believe is currently the world’s most dangerous idea?” relates to how that depersonalization and dehumanization is occurring and, consequently, is relevant to answering all the other questions I articulated. It’s the answer to that first question that I’d like to speak briefly about in this text.

I believe that the idea that there is nothing special about being human and, therefore, humans do not deserve “special respect”, as compared with other animals or even robots is currently the world’s most dangerous idea. This response might seem anodyne and a “cop out”, but I’d like to try to convince my readers otherwise.

Whether humans are “special” -- sometimes referred to as human exceptionalism or uniqueness – and, therefore, deserve “special respect” is a controversial and central question in bioethics, and how we answer it will have a major impact on many important ethical issues.

Although I will frame this discussion in a very limited context of whether humans merit greater respect than animals and robots, it should be kept in mind that not seeing human beings and human life as deserving of “special respect” would have very broad and serious impact for individuals, institutions and society.

It could affect matters that range from respect for human rights, to justifications for armed conflict, how we treat prisoners, how we run our healthcare and aged persons’ care systems, what we will allow or prohibit with respect to euthanasia or reproductive technologies, the ethical and legal tones of our societies, and so on.

Although all living beings deserve respect, which certainly excludes cruelty to animals, traditionally, humans have been given “special respect”, which brings with it special protections, especially of life.

In practice, we have implemented this “special respect” through the idea of personhood, which embodies two related concepts: all humans are persons and no animals are persons.

But the concept of “universal human personhood” - the idea that all humans deserve “special respect” simply because they are human - and the exclusion of all animals from personhood are both being challenged.
Some philosophers are arguing that humans should be regarded as just another animal, which results in a loss of “special respect” for human beings. Others argue that at least certain animals should be regarded as persons in order to give them the same rights and protections as humans, which results in the same outcome, a loss of “special respect” for human beings.

**Humans are just another animal...**

Princeton philosopher, Peter Singer, takes the former approach. He believes that distinguishing humans from other animals and, as a result, treating animals differently from humans, is a form of wrongful discrimination he calls "speciesism." In short, he rejects the claim that humans are special as compared with other animals and, therefore, deserve “special respect”. Rather, he believes the respect owed to a living being should depend only on avoiding suffering to it, not on whether or not the being is human.

That means that what we do not do to humans in order not to inflict suffering on them, we should not do to animals; and what we do to animals to relieve their suffering and regard as ethical, we should also do for humans. Consequently, we don’t eat humans, therefore, we shouldn’t eat animals. We allow euthanasia for animals, therefore, we should, likewise, allow it for humans. This is where the pro-euthanasia argument that “you love your dog and euthanize it to relieve its suffering, so you should do the same for people you love” comes from.

**Animals as non-human persons...**

To implement this “equal treatment” of humans and animals other philosophers have proposed that at least some animals should be regarded as persons. They do this on the basis that the attribution of personhood should not depend, yet again, on being human, but on having certain characteristics or capacities to function in certain ways. They argue that animals which are self-conscious, intelligent, and have free will and emotions comparable to those of humans, should be treated as non-human persons.

Correlatively, these philosophers argue that some humans, who lack the characteristics on the basis of which some animals are designated as persons, should not be characterized as persons. They propose that for humans to be considered persons they must be self aware, have a sense of their history and, perhaps, of a future, and possess a capacity to relate to others.
Consequently, it’s a logical application of this approach that these philosophers believe that humans who lack these characteristics, for instance, seriously mentally disabled adult humans and disabled babies with no potential to develop them, who are among the most vulnerable, weakest and most in need members of our societies, are not persons, and, therefore, are not entitled to the protections personhood brings, for instance, protection of their right to life. We could ponder whether such thinking has been adopted in the Netherlands where the recent Groningen protocol sets out the conditions on which parents of disabled newborn babies can give consent to their child being euthanized.

In summary, both the “humans are just another animal” camp of philosophers and the “animals as non-human persons” one believe that humans are not special and don’t deserve “special respect” just because they are human, and that some animals could deserve greater respect than some humans.

In this regard, American lawyer and author, Wesley J. Smith, has an important insight to offer. Starbucks Coffee Company ran a campaign called “The Way I See It.” Starbucks claims that it has “always supported a good healthy discussion,” and in the tradition of coffee houses that spark good conversations it acquired a “collection of thoughts, opinions and expressions provided by notable figures,” which it printed on its coffee cups to encourage good conversations amongst its customers. Here’s what Smith wrote as quote number 127:

“The morality of the 21st century will depend on how we respond to this simple but profound question: Does every human life have equal moral value simply and merely because it is human? Answer yes, and we have a chance of achieving universal human rights. Answer no, and it means that we are merely another animal in the forest.”

This is a powerful warning that deciding about whether humans are “special” is no insignificant issue or choice on our parts.

**Wider impacts of loss of human exceptionalism...**

But this idea that simply being human does not mean one deserves “special respect”, rather, the respect owed to a “being” depends on its having certain attributes, is not only a serious danger to vulnerable humans. It could also lead to situations in which robots would be seen to deserve greater respect than humans and ethical restrictions on what we may do to change human life would become inoperative.
People, who believe the kind and degree of respect owed to an entity depends on its intelligence, argue that some super-intelligent robots will deserve more respect than humans. They define intelligence narrowly, as logical, cognitive mentation and for them these robots are more “intelligent” than any humans. This approach has far-reaching and serious implications, well beyond the degree of respect that should be shown to an individual human, as compared with an individual robot.

If there is nothing special about being human, there is no “essence of our humanness” that we must hold on trust for future generations. That means we are free to use the new technoscience, as the transhumanists advocate we should, to alter humans so that they become “post-human”, that is, not human at all, as we know it. In other words, there would be many less or perhaps no ethical barriers to seeking the transhumanists’ “utopian” goal, that “humans will become an obsolete model”. This would be achieved through our redesigning ourselves using technoscience – or perhaps robots doing so; instead of our designing them they would redesign us! It’s interesting to note that Francis Fukyama believes that transhumanism is the world’s most dangerous idea.

We used to regard humans as special on the basis that they had a soul, a Divine spark, and animals did not. We can distinguish robots in the same way. But, today, far from everyone accepts the concept of a soul.

Most people, however, at least act as though we humans have a "human spirit," a metaphysical, although not necessarily supernatural, element, as part of the essence of our humanness. My definition of the human spirit emphasizes our search for meaning as being central to the essence of our humanness and is broad enough to include both those who are not religious and those who are and, if religious, no matter to which religion they belong. Here’s my definition:

The human spirit is the intangible, immeasurable, ineffable, numinous reality to which all of us need to have access to find meaning in life and to make life worth living — it’s a deeply intuitive sense of relatedness or connectedness to all life, especially other people, to the world, and to the universe in which we live; the metaphysical -- but not necessarily supernatural -- reality which we need to experience to live fully human lives.

Like us animals are conscious so that doesn’t distinguish them from us, but some philosophers see the ethical and moral sense humans have as distinguishing humans from animals. They believe humans are "special" because of this moral sense and, therefore, deserve “special respect”. However, other philosophers and
some scientists are now arguing that some animals have a sense of morality, in other words that “apes have ethics”.

I’m an incurable optimist and I believe that open-minded persons of goodwill, whatever their beliefs, will conclude that humans deserve “special respect” in the sense that there are some things we should not do to humans, even if we might do them to animals or robots, although what we currently do to animals needs very careful ethical consideration.

Implementing and maintaining “special respect” for humans will require that we recognize all humans as having innate human dignity that must be respected and that we regard as unethical interventions on humans that contravene that dignity, such as designing our children; making a baby from artificial sperm or ova or from two same-sex people; creating human-animal hybrids; cloning humans; using human embryos as a “manufacturing plant” to produce therapeutic agents for the rest of us; euthanasia; and, with the new neuroscience, perhaps most worrying of all, designing, controlling or intervening in certain ways on our minds. The field that’s being called neuroethics is just at its beginnings.

It’s true that we need to have greater respect for all life, not just human life. But implementing that respect should not be by way of denigrating respect for humans and human life, which equating humans to animals and to robots does. We are not just another animal in the forest or another robot in the laboratory and promoting the idea that we are is, indeed, a very dangerous one.

Postscript...

After writing this article, I was curious to know what some of my friends and colleagues would consider to be the world’s most dangerous idea at present. When I asked them, a large majority answered, without hesitation, "religion". That caused me to ponder how their choice correlated with my choice.

Whatever they believe, the adherents of militant fundamentalist religions, or any other militant fundamentalism, certainly do not act according to a principle that all humans deserve “special respect”. Like the secularist philosophers whose views I have described, they also categorize people, in their case, as believers or infidels and believe only the former deserve respect.

To the extent that my colleagues see religion as a root cause of this lack of respect for some people and view that as a serious harm, my most dangerous idea and theirs are concordant.
But, over millennia, most religions have been the main institutions carrying and passing on to future generations the idea that humans are "special" and deserve "special respect". So, from that perspective, my colleagues’ view that religion is the most dangerous idea and mine, that it’s not seeing humans’ as special, are in direct conflict.

This “dual use” potential sounds an important warning. As with all ideas, even the idea that humans are “special”, or the practice of religion, or what we believe it is ethical to do with science, can be used not only for good, but also for harm. We need to be aware, always, that we must seek to maximize the former and to minimize the latter.

Recently, an American sociologist who studies religion, Professor Mark Jurgenmeyer, from the University of California, was visiting Mc Gill and I had the opportunity to ask him whether he thought my colleagues were correct that religion was the world’s most dangerous idea. I found his response very interesting.

He explained that the word religion is only 200 years old and the concept probably came as a reaction to the emergence of secularism, which was linked to the development of science. Before that people had Faith – it consisted of belief, tradition, values, ritual and so on. Everyone had it in some form or other and it couldn’t be separated from being human. In other words, it was of the essence of being human.

He said the division into religious and secular is Cartesian. It can be compared with the mind body split that occurred in medicine. But we can see how medicine has realized that was a serious error and is now addressing that split through concepts of treating the whole person – that is, holistic medicine.

He remarked that, in his view, the world’s most dangerous idea is that religion is just an idea. Rather, Faith is an experience, a doorway to finding meaning, a way of life, and so on. It's an innate aspect of being human.

Indeed, this could explain why, as I believe, we are seeing the emergence of “secular religions” – for instance, sport when it becomes sportism, especially when linked with another “ism”, nationalism, environmentalism, and certainly secularism and atheism are secular religions. So maybe we humans can’t do without Faith, after all, whether the content of the Faith we espouse is belief or disbelief, that is, religious or secular.

To believe in something that matters to us personally is a sine qua non of finding meaning in life, and searching for and finding meaning is of the essence of being
human and what distinguishes us from animals and robots. If we have no such overarching belief we become cynical and nihilistic, fatalistic and depressed – life seems “not worth living”.

Faith, hope and charity are intimately and complexly related to each other. Believing that the entity on which we found our belief matters connects us to the future, which generates hope. Hope stimulates us to help - love – others, because we see them and life as mattering. Hope also helps us to believe that life is worthwhile. And love can generate both belief that life is worthwhile and hope. In short, on this view faith, hope and charity are tools we need to find meaning in life, that is, for realizing as fully as possible the essence of our humanness, that which makes us unique in comparison with all other Creation and creations.
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