

## **PUBLIC SPHERE - Michael Bennett ([www.michaelbennett.org.uk](http://www.michaelbennett.org.uk))**

I subscribe to a 'dual-track' approach to multiculturalism. On the one hand we have the official public sphere of the various political and legal institutions including the judiciary, the legislature and the executive arms of government alongside various public bureaucracies. But this is not the only public space for opinion and will-formation for, on the other hand, we must also consider a range of unofficial social movements which operate in the religious, civic and cultural realms. It is not necessary for the same conditions for democratic deliberation to be operative in the same way in each. In the official public sphere the rules of democratic and rational discourse are the ideal benchmark against which the practice of decision-making can be measured. In the unofficial public sphere there is more room for compromise and the tolerance of difference because the conflicts between groups in this arena do not involve generalisable interests. Or, if they do, such matters have to be transferred to the official public sphere.

In the official public sphere the exercise of authority and the process of democratic deliberation must be conducted on a secular basis. This is essential, in the first place, because of the epistemological preconditions of communicative rationality. But, secondly, it is essential for practical reasons because the secular neutrality of the constitutional state and other public bodies is the only way that different communities with conflicting worldviews can peacefully coexist in a spirit of mutual tolerance that enables them to still subscribe to the particular values of their communities. In order to maintain the right to the free expression of religion the state has to counter the irreconcilable cognitive disagreements between different groups of believers, and between believers and nonbelievers, by neutralising the potential social conflict that will ensue if the mutually exclusive claims of competing faiths were given total freedom in public deliberation. The only way to achieve this is to prescribe that *all official deliberation be conducted on a secular basis*. This not only protects the state and secular society from the unwanted presence of the irrational in public debates, but similarly protects faith communities from intrusive demands from the secular state into their internal affairs. This protection only holds to the extent that a faith community respects the state's secular public prerequisites.

However, the constitutional state cannot conduct this balancing act if the justification of this policy is seen as a mere *modus vivendi* or a technically expedient solution. Such a

justification would prove inadequate in the face of the very powerful and competing reality claims (with their perceived transcendental guarantees) that are held by diverse communities. The secular neutrality of the official public sphere requires conviction from the participants. This is because legal enforcement would be difficult and the strain on social solidarity too great if members of diverse faith groups were unable to restrain themselves through a belief in, and commitment to, the necessity, as well as the mutual benefit of, a secularised public sphere. Constitutional democracies must therefore be firmly based on the two primary sources of legitimation, that is, the equal participation of all citizens and the 'epistemic dimension of a deliberation that grounds the presumption of rationally acceptable outcomes.' (Habermas 2008: 121)

It is plain, therefore, that a multicultural and multi-faith society democracy can only function in the face of deeper cultural divides if members of such communities not only comply formally with the secular nature of public processes, they must also have developed the *cognitive* and *emotional* competencies to achieve such compliance. 'They must have learned to relate their religious convictions in reflexively coherent ways to the fact of religious and ideological pluralism.' (Habermas 2008: 4) In addition, they have to reconcile the epistemological primacy given to science and reason with their faith. This will require the state to: (a) ensure that all children attend schools where these psychological competencies regarding cognitive and emotional development can be learned; and (b) regulate the religious teaching of children of all faiths such that it does not undermine (a) and that all children have access to learning a religion in a reflexive attitude. On the other hand, the state must also do its best to ensure that citizens develop the political consciousness of mutual rights and responsibilities that democracy requires, as well as developing the epistemic necessity of accepting the process of rational deliberation as the only viable means of reaching public decisions. It is only on the basis of mutual respect as free and equal members of a political community, and the adoption of the imperative to seek a rationally motivated agreement regarding civic and political conflicts, that the contradictions between religions and worldviews can be contained. The same is true of the relationship between faith-based and secular-based citizens.

The above requirements of the separation of church and state result in the obligation to conduct all official state, political, legal and other formal affairs in a language that is equally accessible to all, that is, the language of reason. But these conditions do not need to be so

tightly enforced in the informal arenas of civil society and everyday life. This burden of rationality on members of faith and cultural groups does not need to be as rigid in those aspects of life beyond their participation in public life and beyond the socialisation practices that provide them with the competencies to participate in a secular public sphere. Social solidarity, therefore, does not require the complete secularisation of religious life but it does require the competence to hold a faith reflexively. This equates to having the 'epistemic ability to consider one's own religious convictions reflexively from the outside and to connect with secular views.' (Habermas 2008: 130) This, as Habermas indicates, is a considerable psychological achievement for people who, by the very nature of religious faiths, have a strong desire to base all their actions in line with their faith. It would be both unreasonable and impractical to require such people to enact a total split between their public and private identities. It should, therefore, be possible to allow them to 'express and justify their convictions in a religious language even when they cannot find secular "translations for them".' (Habermas 2008: 130) This 'right' is subordinate to the requirement of using secular expressions in the 'official' public sphere. It has two benefits. It enriches the secular world by offering challenging views on existential issues (life, death, suffering and so on) that a very narrow and positivistic secular culture can easily ignore. This process also works in the opposite direction by exposing those who hold their beliefs and practices in a very rigid and mechanistic fashion to the penetrating gaze of reason. Secularists must come to terms with coexisting with religious people:

'The guarantee of equal ethical liberties calls for the secularisation of state power, but it forbids the political overgeneralisation of the secularised worldview. In so far as they act in their role as citizens, secularised citizens may neither fundamentally deny that religious worldviews may be true nor reject the right of devout fellow-citizens to couch their contributions to public discussions in religious language. A liberal political culture can even expect its secularised citizens to participate in efforts to translate relevant contributions from the religious language into a publicly accessible language.' (Habermas 2008: 310)

In summary, we are all allowed to realise our secular or religious ethos within the limits already outlined. Everyone must respect the ethos of others. This is not as difficult as it may seem because it does not require us to accept the views of others that we reject, it just limits the practical effects of conflicting convictions.

**References**

Habermas, J. (2008) *Between Naturalism and Religion*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

See *The Secular Sacred* – M. Bennett (2014) Kindle Edition.

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