

## SAVING APPEARANCES: RELIGIOUS INVISIBILITY AND STATE SECULARISM – THE MYTH OF GYGES REVISITED

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### ABSTRACT

Though Herodotus' *Histories* relates the story of Gyges, it is Plato's account that drew literary attention. As told in Plato's *Republic*, Gyges discovers that his newly found ring gives him the power of invisibility which he uses to kill the King. Plato's dialogue suggests that invisibility can have dire political consequences if all there is to justice is appearance, as no true difference then exists between the just and the unjust. In recent debates state secularism has become associated with the need to make religion invisible in the public sphere. It is here argued that the disappearance of religious symbols in the public domain does not make secularism more visible. In fact, it risks transgressing core values that had allowed a Western consensus to gather around the separation of religion and state as the best means of enacting societal peace. Secularism does not require religious invisibility but generosity towards diversity.

### RÉSUMÉ

*Bien que ce soit l'Histoire d'Hérodote qui relate le récit de Gygès, c'est plutôt l'adaptation de Platon qui a attiré l'attention. Dans La République, Gygès découvre que l'anneau qu'il a trouvé lui donne le pouvoir d'invisibilité et il l'utilise pour assassiner le roi. Le dialogue de Platon suggère que l'invisibilité peut avoir des conséquences politiques néfastes lorsqu'il n'y a qu'apparence de justice car ainsi il n'existe aucune différence réelle entre le juste et l'injuste. Les récents débats associent la laïcité de l'État avec le besoin de rendre la religion invisible dans la sphère publique. Nous soutenons que la disparition des symboles religieux du domaine public ne rend pas la laïcité plus visible. En fait, elle risque de bafouer les valeurs fondamentales qui ont permis d'établir un consensus occidental selon lequel la séparation de la religion et de l'État constitue le meilleur moyen de promulguer la paix sociale. La laïcité n'a pas besoin d'invisibilité religieuse mais plutôt de générosité envers la diversité.*

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“Well, a man always believes his eyes better than his ears...”  
 —Herodotus, *Book I: Gyges Wins the Throne*<sup>1</sup>

“If the state is neutral, it has to be seen,  
 that the neutrality be visible.”  
 —Bernard Drainville (2014)<sup>2</sup>

Within Quebec’s current political context, we are being asked to consider the relationship between the existence of a secular state and the appearance of a secular state. It would seem that being a secular state is not enough as this alone is no guarantee of appearing secular. For the state to *appear* secular, according to the Parti québécois (PQ), religious symbols as worn by state employees must disappear. Certainly the most controversial aspect of the PQ’s proposed Charter of Values (formally known as Bill 60) is its insistence that no employee in the public service be allowed to wear ostentatious religious symbols. The reasoning is anchored in the claim that Quebec is a secular state, and therefore, neutral with respect to religion. On this view, to be a secular state involves being *seen* as secular. Its position is to be taken literally - religion must be invisible. If enacted in the near future, people employed in the public service would obviously not be asked to forsake their religious beliefs as that would be a blatant violation of human rights and freedoms. They would be asked, in the name of state secularism, not to appear to be religious. This begs the question as to whether the concealment of religious commitments ensures the visibility of secularism.

### Gyges Ring Revisited

As children we have all played the game of invisibility – imagining all the things we could do if only we were invisible. Our childhood comic books gave us stories about the powers of invisibility while advertising those “X-Ray glasses” that would allow us to see what was hidden. To see that children’s literature often draws on invisibility to heighten a story’s interest we have only to turn to J.J.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* or to consider the wizardry of J.K. Rowling’s Potter books. Of course childhood fiction is not the sole repository of tales of invisible forces. It was a useful metaphor in Adam Smith’s description of the market economy as regulated by an invisible hand, or, again, in Robert Boyle’s referencing his meetings with natural philosophers as an “invisible college,” preceding the formation of the Royal Society of London. Filling in the void left by invisibility is what captures the imagination. Western literature, both secular and religious, has long played with the concept of invisibility to reveal truths.

In his *Histories*, Herodotus (484–425 BCE) tells the story of the bodyguard Gyges whose presence was concealed by the King of Lydia to perpetuate a wrong against the Queen. Realizing her husband's treachery in sharing her nakedness with another man, she summoned Gyges the next day to plot the death of the King.<sup>3</sup> Plato's later account of Gyges of Lydia in the *Republic* parallels Herodotus' tale with yet a new twist: Gyges possesses a ring that makes him invisible.<sup>4</sup> Turned inward the ring confers invisibility on Gyges, whose appearance can be restored by the reverse movement. Handcrafted by Plato, Gyges' story serves to illustrate both the powers and the pitfalls of invisibility. Indeed, as one of the dialogue's interlocutors asks, why should the just and the unjust behave differently if possessed of Gyges' ring? Cloaked in invisibility both could then indulge their desires while acting from self-interest. The interlocutor's claim that people don't desire to be just but rather only to appear just draws the reader's attention to the false divide between appearance and reality. Plato's *Republic* builds its narrative on the idea that if the just person actually exists as a reality and not as an appearance, invisibility serves no purpose. The just person will go about his or her affairs in the same way whether hidden or visible. Clearly invisibility advantages only the unjust person.

The question explored in this essay is this: might the act of turning Gyges' ring inward, banning religious symbols from Quebec's public sector and thus hiding the reality of religious pluralism, risk undermining the essence of secularism? In standing on appearances, are we losing our footing by shattering the foundation stone of secularism and misrepresenting it? Properly understood, secularism is rooted in a peace process working to establish equalities.

### **The Template of Peace: Westphalia (1648)**

Al Qaeda's assault on New York's twin towers in 2001 exposed the vulnerability of the West to attacks by religiously motivated terrorism. The attacks of 9/11 had an impact in academic circles. Searching through the ashes of conflict, antiterrorist laws, access restrictions to borders, state-imposed limits on religious dress, etc., academics have concentrated their efforts on revisiting and reworking the scholarship on secularism. Predictably what has emerged from all of this activity is the realization that the separation of state and religion is a complex and subtle topic. The crisscrossing lines of this scholarship reveal intersections of agreement. First, state secularism embraces values that are not antagonistic to the existence and expression of religion. Second, we should no longer think of "secularism" in the singular form.<sup>5</sup>

This addition of an “s” to secularism reflects the different forms that it has taken as it has emerged in the west and elsewhere in the world.<sup>6</sup> Neglecting entirely how the word “secular” enters the lexicon<sup>7</sup>, it yet bears mentioning that secularism’s rise in the West is frequently tied to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 (otherwise known to contemporaries as the Peace of Exhaustion).<sup>8</sup> This brought an end to the “religious wars” in Western Europe and established the sovereignty of the nation-state.

The traditional story recounts the establishment of equal nation-states through a decree making religion a “domestic” matter. Religion, in effect, was removed from the web of international relations, no longer serving as a means to making alliances. This allowed for transnational interests to flourish while internal/domestic matters arising from religious quarrelling would now be regarded as local problems settled by whatever means were deemed appropriate by the state. Westphalia sovereignty established an international decree of non-interference (at least with respect to religion) among nation-states, thereby fostering free communication and trade.<sup>9</sup> This isn’t “secularism,” of course, though the pattern of assigning different spaces for religious matters (domestic/internal) and state affairs (international/external) provided a template for peace.

Religion didn’t disappear from public life or even from a nation-state’s identity after Westphalia. What changed was the reaction to another nation-state’s religion. International reactions to other states were governed by laws of equality, regardless of religion. Religion was privatized and only exercised power over believers, not over states. Cavanaugh has pointed out that the confinement of religion within the bounds of personal space through the “privatization of the Church” coincides with the rise of the nation-state.<sup>10</sup> Religion now signified a set of personal beliefs. And similarly to mathematics which conceives of objects as equals that are members of the same set, religion as a set of personal beliefs and practices became an equalizer of Protestant and Catholic disparities. To the extent that they belonged to the same “internal” space wherein belief resides, all faith traditions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Sikhism, etc.) were made equal.<sup>11</sup>

### **Peace, Science and Secularism**

For the Westphalian template of peace to function *within* a nation-state, heads-of-state had to transform law so as to treat individuals *as if* they were sovereign states. The “as if” is important because individuals did not appear to be equal nor did they rule over anything, except their households and their ideas. Establishing the equality of

individuals was made possible through the transformative process of the Scientific Revolution.

Much has been written about this revolution of ideas and practices and I cannot in such short space delve into details. Four points bear scrutiny, however. What emerged from the rise of the new science was that: a) “matter” lost its Aristotelian qualities<sup>12</sup>; b) causality was reduced to outside forces, such that all phenomena could be accounted for according to how things banged into one another; c) these “things” themselves were identified as corpuscular bodies – the emphasis being on “corpse” – making matter atomic and dead; and finally, d) these laws of motion were enough to explain all of nature. No longer was there any need for the sympathy of souls to account for the natural order of things. Nature was a machine.<sup>13</sup> The mechanistic metaphor proved useful as a way of conceiving of society’s individuals in atomistic terms – a move embraced by both Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. The equality of individuals, like the equality of atoms, was achieved by quieting the causal powers of internal forces.

The bond between the equal and sovereign status of individuals was forged by use of natural law metaphors drawn from physics in combination with peace initiatives derived from Westphalia. In his 1689 *A Letter Concerning Toleration* Locke claimed that the state “must strive to protect absolute liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty,” yet Martha Nussbaum notes that he “made no attempt to diagnose the forces in human beings that militate against toleration.”<sup>14</sup> Locke’s purpose was to establish the sovereignty of individuals while deflecting attention from internally derived causal powers. Understanding the reason for his neglect of the force of “political emotions”<sup>15</sup> as potential threats to tolerance asks us to recognize that, for Locke, internal matters are ruled by the sovereign individual. The moral order, for Locke, derives from the unimpeded atomic interaction of individuals, respectful and protective of each other’s sovereignty. It is the sovereign individual who ultimately tames those internal forces. Thus Locke claims that individuals must be encouraged, but not forced, to be mindful of their “duties of peace and good-will towards all men,” to “charity, meekness, and toleration.”<sup>16</sup>

The Westphalian template for social peace could be applied within other spheres of influence. Just as nation-states were sovereign and thus accorded a decree of non-interference, so too could individuals be deemed sovereign and protected by a decree of non-interference by the state. As Charles Taylor notes, “[t]he crucial move that we see in the modern West from the seventeenth century, the move that takes us out of the cosmic religious conceptions of order, establishes a new ‘bottom-up’ view of society, as existing for the protection and mutual benefit of its (equal)

members.”<sup>17</sup> This “modern moral order,” as he calls it, preserves three basic principles: “1. the rights and liberties of the members, 2. the equality among them..., and 3., the principle that rule is based on consent...”<sup>18</sup> This new form of individual freedom – freedom from interference by others – was the source idea that inspired revolutions.

### **The Substratum of Secularism — Peace**

The peace patterns of Westphalia, which were essentially ways of establishing equalities, allowed for the emergence of secularism within nation-states. All religions are equal because they locate the centrality of beliefs within a private space that is ruled over by the individual. As society’s atoms, individuals are states onto themselves. Social peace, on the model of Westphalia, functions to the degree that equality is realized.

Peace, then, and not secularism, is the value that fostered the search for equality. Secularism issues from negotiated peace and is not something that derives meaning through opposition to religion. Far from symbolizing the demise of religion, the peace of Westphalia that brought an end to the religious wars in the 17<sup>th</sup> century would provide the template governing reactions to other nation-states and their religious identities. Secularism thus provided a harbor for the peaceful existence of religion in society. Charles Taylor is correct in suggesting that modern secularism is working with the wrong model when represented as opposition of religion and the state.<sup>19</sup> Consistent with the values and patterns of peace, secularism serves the purpose of ensuring equality and freedom of beliefs, thereby keeping the state in a position of neutrality with respect to religion.

Seeing secularism as the outgrowth of peace initiatives prevents us from associating it with efforts to banish the presence of religion in society. “We think that secularism (or *laïcité*) has to do with the relation of state and religion,” Taylor writes, “whereas in fact it has to do with the (correct) response of the democratic state to diversity.”<sup>20</sup> This is consistent with the template of peace established at Westphalia. Ill-conceived as signaling the abstraction of religion from society, secularism is in fact a gesture of generosity. It is only through generosity and understanding that any rightful and lasting peace can be established.

### **Gyges’ Ring and Secularism as Generosity**

Invisibility hides relationships. Simone Weil, commenting on the Gyges story, remarked that in becoming invisible, Gyges committed the “act of setting himself aside” from his crime.<sup>21</sup> He hid his connection to the King’s assassination. By this concealment, we are made to believe

that Gyges is not the King's assassin. This new connection is a forced falsehood. Without invisibility we would know the truth.

Weil's concern about invisibility centers on this simple act of "setting aside" connections. In the debate over Quebec's Charter of Values (Bill 60) we hear that religious people working in the public sector would *only* be asked to "set aside" their religious dress for eight hours a day. This "setting aside" that makes invisible their connection to religious beliefs is required so that the state can appear secular and therefore neutral towards religion. In other words, this request to set aside a connection – the person and their religion – initiates a new association, that people in the public service have no religious connections. This is a forced falsehood. The kind of secularism made visible through concealment is a false image of neutrality.

In fact, this request to make religious symbols invisible sets aside trust. This is the trust that the state has in those individuals who are employed on the basis of qualifications to do a job and to do it with impartiality. The request to remove religious symbols does not make religion disappear from the lives of those employed in the public service. But it does make visible the state's lack of trust that those who are religious can act with impartiality. It feeds the fear that religion interferes with impartiality in a way that cannot be said to apply to those who hold to no religious commitments.

Religion as an expression of beliefs and practices allows believers to make sense of the world. It is part of how they find meaning in what they do. Of course making life meaningful is also possible through an embrace of non-religious views as is true for atheists and agnostics alike. The meaning found through religious identity doesn't disappear by setting aside clothing or symbols. To think that the removal of a person's religious adornments signals the separation of religion and state is to recast secularism as a mechanism of division rather than as a response of impartiality to diversity.<sup>22</sup> What is most striking about the request to set aside religious symbols is that it reneges on a trust in another's ability to carry out duties in an impartial way. This lack of trust fundamentally misrepresents the generosity that underlies secularism.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Secularism rose from a peace process. The Peace of Westphalia didn't abolish religion; it produced an order that would allow it to flourish. Secularism born of this peace process was a response to the new religious diversity brought about by the Reformation and became a means of establishing the sovereignty of the individual. People were now regarded as equals and their freedom of expression was protected by the state.

To think that setting aside religious symbols guarantees the visibility of secularism is to misconstrue the meaning of secularism. It is to see it as some kind of addition by subtraction. Contextualized as a gesture arising from peace, secularism can be seen as a catalyst that restructures relationships on the basis of trust, impartiality and generosity. If state neutrality involves the avoidance of “favoring or disfavoring not just religious positions, but any basic position, religious or nonreligious,” as Taylor suggests, then this is what needs to be on view.<sup>23</sup> A secularism that is visible must be seen to trust in people’s ability to act with impartiality regardless of their beliefs, religious or otherwise. Individual sovereignty must be as visible as the trust granted by those authorities who judge these individuals to be worthy of serving the public. To be a real as opposed to an apparent secular state is to see generosity as extending a hand in trust. This is not tolerance towards others, but faith in the goodness of others and recognition of our common humanity.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Herodotus (1983). *The Histories*. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, Ltd., p. 44.
- 2 P. Authier. (2014). Charter hearings will be highly political. *The Gazette*, January 14.
- 3 Herodotus, op. cit., pp. 44–45.
- 4 *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (1989). Republic. Translated by Paul Shorey. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 607–608.
- 5 Two recent books make this intersection apparent. E. Mendieta, J. Van Antwerpen and C. Calhoun (eds). (2011) *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*. New York: Columbia University Press. In this book, four leading scholars debate the issue of religion and public space. And C. Calhoun, M. Juergensmeyer, and J. Van Antwerpen (eds). (2011). *Rethinking Secularism*. London: Oxford University Press.
- 6 See José Casanova (2011). *The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms, and P.J. Katzenstein* (2011). *Civilizational States, Secularisms, and Religions*. Both are included in C. Calhoun, M. Juergensmeyer, and J. Van Antwerpen (eds). (2011). *Rethinking Secularism*. Op. cit., 54–74, 145–165.
- 7 See Charles Taylor (2007). *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, pp. 1–4.



- 8 C. Calhoun, M. Juergensmeyer, and J. Van Anterwerpen (eds). (2011). *Rethinking Secularism*. London: Oxford University Press, pp. 14–17; M. Steward (2006). *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World*. London: W.W. Norton & Co., p. 40.
- 9 S. Hauerwas (2007). The end of religious pluralism: A tribute to David Burrell. In T. Banchoff (ed.) *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 283–300.
- 10 William Cavanaugh (2002). *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the liturgy as a Political Act in the an Age of Global Consumerism*. New York: Clark, p. 31, cited in Hauerwas (2007). The end of religious pluralism: A tribute to David Burrell. *Ibid*, p. 286.
- 11 See Charles Taylor’s discussion of how the rise of “disenchantment” leads to both the devaluation of ritual and the growth of religion as personal belief. C. Taylor (2011). *Western Secularity*. In C. Calhoun, M. Juergensmeyer, and J. Van Anterwerpen (eds) *Rethinking Secularism*. London: Oxford University Press, 31–53. For a detailed account of the history of this transition, see his book *The Secular Age*, Part I, op. cit.
- 12 Forces internal to things no longer played a role in understanding physical relations in the world. Earlier beliefs were that rocks are heavy because they “seek” to be at the center of the earth, water “desires” to cover, and air to surround, things, while fire moves upward because it “seeks” the heavens. In the absence of internal causes of motion Aristotle’s four forms of causality were reduced to one – efficient causes.
- 13 For a well-cast overview, see Steven Shapin (1996). *The Scientific Revolution*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- 14 M.C. Nussbaum (2007). Radical evil in liberal democracies: The neglect of the political emotions. In T. Banchoff (ed.) *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 171–202, p. 173.
- 15 *Ibid*, p. 172.
- 16 John Locke (1689). *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Cited in Nussbaum, *ibid*, p. 173.
- 17 C. Taylor (2011). Why we need a radical redefinition of Secularism. In E. Mendieta, J. Vanantwerpen and C. Calhoun (eds). *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*. New York: Columbia University Press, 34–59, p. 46.
- 18 *Ibid*, pp. 46–47.
- 19 *Ibid*, p. 36.
- 20 *Ibid*, p. 36.

- 21 Simone Weil (1952, 1992). *Gravity & Grace*. London: Routledge, p. 125.
- 22 Miroslav Volf draws attention to the difference between “separation” and “impartiality” in his discussion of secularism. M. Volf (2007). A voice of one’s own: Public faith in a pluralistic world. In T. Banchoff (ed.). *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 271–281.
- 23 Taylor as quoted by Craig Calhoun (2011). Afterword. In E. Mendieta, J. Vanantwerpen and C. Calhoun (eds). *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 129.