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A VARIETY OF MORAL SOURCES IN A SECULAR AGE

– Damian Barnat –

Abstract. The aim of my paper is to assess in a critical way the views presented by Graeme Smith in his book *A Short History of Secularism* (2008) as well as in his paper *Talking to Ourselves: An Investigation into the Christian Ethics Inherent in Secularism* (2017). According to Smith, secular Western societies are underpinned by Christian ethics. An example of a moral norm that – in Smith’s opinion – derives from medieval Christianity and shapes the moral condition of the members of contemporary societies, is the concern about the poor. My criticism of Smith’s thesis is based on the distinction between moral norms and the ways of justifying them. Referring to this distinction, my objective is to show that certain norms which appear to be the same cannot be treated as identical due to the significant differences in their justification.

Keywords: Charles Taylor, secularism, ethics, religion, modernity, Enlightenment.

Introduction

The aim of my paper is to assess in a critical way the views presented by Graeme Smith in his book *A Short History of Secularism* (2008),¹ as well as in his paper *Talking to Ourselves: An Investigation into the Christian Ethics Inherent in Secularism* (2017).² According to Smith, secular Western societies are underpinned by Christian ethics. An example of a moral norm that – in Smith’s opinion – derives from medieval Christianity and shapes the moral condition of the members of contemporary societies, is the concern about the poor. My criticism of Smith’s thesis is based on the distinction between moral norms and the ways of justifying them. Referring to this distinction, my objective is to show that certain norms which appear to be the same cannot be treated as identical due to the significant differences in their justification. Secular moral conceptions that are present in contemporary pluralist societies provide justification for certain norms that were erstwhile rooted in religion. For this reason, I claim that the continuous presence of the concern for the poor in Western culture does not provide sufficient support for Smith’s thesis.

¹ Smith (2008).

² Smith (2017).

In the first part of my paper, a broader framework – the so called “religious turn” – in which I place Smith’s position is described. In the second part, I discuss the issue of the Enlightenment’s impact on religion. Following Charles Taylor, I attempt to show – contrary to Smith’s argumentation – that the Enlightenment creates the basis of a secular morality alternative to religion (“exclusive humanism,” or William Clifford’s “ethics of belief”). In the third part, I have drawn upon Bronisław Geremek’s analyses to show the differences between medieval and modern attitudes towards poor people. In the last part, I consider Smith’s standpoint from the perspective of a debate concerning the historical sources of modernity. I conclude that modern culture of the Western world cannot be reduced to either religion or reason and should be seen as deeply diverse – it is a culture in which an “ongoing commitment to do good” can be justified by both religious and secular reasons.

The Religious Turn

The issues discussed by Smith form part of the “religious turn” which occurred in humanities and social sciences. For a long time, representatives of these fields had held a belief that religion was not a significant factor for social and cultural analyses. Religion was deliberately sidelined and its impact on people’s lives marginalized.³ This attitude reflected a profound influence of the so-called “secularization thesis,” according to which the development of modernity leads to the disappearance of religion.⁴ However, since the 1980s this thesis has been regularly called into question and many scholars began to take religion into account in their descriptions of social and cultural phenomena.

A perfect example of this is the evolution of Jürgen Habermas’s views. In his early work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*,⁵ he presented a historical perspective on the public sphere, entirely neglecting the influence of religion on its emergence. According to Craig Calhoun, the editor of the book *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, it was not a “mere oversight,” but rather the result of “anti-religious assumptions”⁶ made by the German thinker. In response to his critics Habermas admitted that a new edition of the book would have to take into

³ Calhoun, Mendieta, VanAntwerpen (2013): 1–2.

⁴ Casanova (1994): 17–20.

⁵ Habermas (1991).

⁶ Calhoun (1992): 35–36. See also Mendieta, VanAntwerpen (2011): 3.

consideration the way religion effected the emergence of the modern public sphere.⁷

I believe that Smith's position is related to the religious turn which we are currently witnessing in the humanities and social sciences. Many contemporary thinkers not only recognize the importance of religion in discussions about politics, history, and society, but they also point to the fundamental role that Christianity played in the formation of contemporary values and practices of the Western society.

According to Charles Taylor, the tensions and dilemmas of the medieval Christian world provide a hermeneutic key to understanding the process responsible for the rise of modern unbelief.⁸ A French thinker, Marcel Gauchet, in a bit similar vein says that Christianity prepared the ground for a "departure from religion."⁹ Another French theorist, Alain Badiou, claims that the historical sources of the modern moral universalism stem from the views of St. Paul.¹⁰ Larry Siedentop reasons in a similar way, claiming that liberal democracy relies on the idea of equality stemming from the Christian conception of the identity of an individual.¹¹ Smith follows these thinkers in that he says: "we should think of secularism as the latest expression of the Christian religion."¹² And: "Secularism is Christian ethics shorn of its doctrine. It is the ongoing commitment to do good, understood in traditional Christian terms, without a concern for the technicalities of the teachings of the Church."¹³

Before I go further, I would like to make a short remark about the word "secularism." It is quite an ambiguous term. It can be used as a political concept to refer to the conception of a secular state.¹⁴ But it can also refer to an antireligious ideology, presented for instance by Richard Dawkins for whom believing in God is the same as believing in fairy tales.¹⁵ Secularism denotes a non-religious world-view as well, and this is the meaning in which Smith makes use of this term. In his

⁷ Habermas (1992): 421–461.

⁸ Taylor (2007).

⁹ Gauchet (1997): 9–10.

¹⁰ Badiou (2003).

¹¹ Siedentop (2014).

¹² Smith (2008): 2.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Maclure, Taylor (2011).

¹⁵ Dawkins (2006): 52–53.

book he describes secularism as “a way of thinking about the world and life which makes no reference to supernatural beliefs.”¹⁶

The Enlightenment’s Impact on Religion

In this part, I would like to concentrate on Smith’s account of the way the condition of religion in modern society has been influenced by the Enlightenment and the Victorian era. I would also like to compare some aspects of Smith’s standpoint with Charles Taylor’s narrative of Western secularity.

Smith criticizes the standard theory of secularization, according to which religious decline is an inevitable outcome of the development of modern science. This theory is based on the assumption that faith is incompatible with reason. The problem with this account is that scientific discoveries themselves do not necessarily lead to rejecting belief in God.

While critically revising the scientific version of the secularization theory, Smith claims that science has not displaced faith, but replaced religion in a “technological function” which religion had held before modernity. This meant that many believers appealed to the realm of the supernatural when facing temporal problems (diseases, poor harvests etc.). The modern science has shown its dominance over religion in terms of explaining and controlling natural phenomena. It is important to note that the Enlightenment has played a crucial part in this process of the development of the “scientific mentality.”¹⁷

However, this does not mean that under the impact of the Enlightenment religion has been deprived of its role in human life. According to Smith, religion is present in the contemporary Western society in the form of ethics. This society Smith calls an “ethics society.” It results from the fact that science has not been able to provide an “ethical system” for the Western society, and the only existing set of moral norms has come from Christianity. According to Smith:

[...] science is functionally superior to religion and provides better explanation of the working of nature and human life. However, science has not so far developed an adequate ethical system. Hence, in the field of ethics it has not been able to displace Christianity [...] in the absence of a scientific ethical system, Christian ethics remain firmly in place. The choice for Western society was between Christian ethics or no ethics.¹⁸

¹⁶ Smith (2008): 22.

¹⁷ Ibidem: 40.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

I would like to compare the narration proposed by Smith with the conception of the Western secularity presented by Charles Taylor. Analyzing the Victorian crisis of faith, Taylor claims that the opposition between science and religion concerned mostly the moral condition of human beings. Thus, it was not scientific discoveries that made belief in God problematic; rather, it was the new vision of our ethical predicament that was inspired by the Enlightenment and also scientific inquiry.

According to Taylor, there was an influential non-theistic morality that made unbelief attractive to many Victorians.¹⁹ One of the sources of this morality was the “ethics of belief” proposed by William Clifford.²⁰ This ethics says that we should not give credence to “unworthy evidence.” Otherwise we act not only irrationally, but also morally wrong. Of course, religious convictions also fall into the category of impermissible beliefs. As Clifford writes: “It is wrong always, and everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”²¹

I would like to make three observations with regard to the ethics of belief. Firstly, this ethics, as Taylor notes, derives from a procedure used in science: one is not allowed to turn hypotheses into reliable theories unless they are proved by evidence. This procedure is then “promoted into a moral precept for life in general.”²² In this sense the ethics of belief is an ethics alternative to religion that stems from scientific method. Secondly, the main reason behind the ethics of belief is commitment to universal benevolence. Not following the ethics of belief defies, in Clifford’s opinion, “our duty to mankind.”²³ Clifford claims that there is a strong connection between our beliefs and actions. In his view, beliefs that are based on insufficient evidence result in actions that lead to human harm and suffering. Thirdly, in Taylor’s opinion, the ethics of belief was appealing not only because of its general principle, but also because of the underlying moral vision of our condition. This vision was derived from the Enlightenment narrative of courageous coming to adulthood. According to this narrative, we are strongly tempted to give assent to childish comforting illusions that promise us existential safety. The example of such a temptation is the belief in God’s Providence. Therefore, the

¹⁹ Taylor (2007): 563.

²⁰ Clifford (2008): 9–40.

²¹ *Ibidem*:18.

²² Taylor (2003): 44.

²³ Clifford (2008): 16.

follower of the ethics of belief must overcome these “comforting untruths” and become a courageous, mature, and self-responsible moral agent.²⁴

The question is whether the ethics of belief is really as influential as Taylor seems to claim. Is this something that shapes our “modern social imaginary”? The popularity of this ethics can be confirmed by William James’s response to Clifford. In a well-known essay *The Will to Believe*, James pointed out that “the agnostic vetoes upon faith as something weak and shameful” are among the reasons why many people stay skeptical about religion.²⁵ A perfect illustration of the attractiveness of the story of courageous coming to adulthood for unbelievers can be found in a contemporary book on atheism by Julian Baggini. The author says:

Many atheists throughout history have compared their belief with a form of growing up. [...] With religion, we are like children who still believe that we are protected in the world by benevolent parents who will look after us. It is no coincidence that God is referred to as father in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Atheism is the throwing off of childish illusions and acceptance that we have to make our own way in the world. We have no divine parents who always protect us and who are unquestionably good. The world is instead a big and scary place, but also one where there are opportunities to go out and create lives for ourselves.²⁶

One could reply to the above argument by pointing out that the percentage of declared unbelievers in secular Western societies is relatively low as compared to the proportion of people who affirm belief in God or some kind of supernatural reality.²⁷ In this regard Smith rightly claims that “atheism has never won anything but paltry support in the West.”²⁸ Although the entrenchment of the ethics of belief is not reflected in statistics, one could argue that it has a strong impact on the way believers *experience* their faith. The narrative of courageous coming to adulthood that is implicit in this ethics makes religious belief problematic, something

²⁴ Taylor (2007): 563.

²⁵ James (1979): 204.

²⁶ Baggini (2003): 110–111.

²⁷ I refer here to the phenomenon described by Grace Davie as “believing without belonging.” It consists in the fact that many people, while abandoning the traditional forms of religion, still believe in some kind of supernatural entity: God, impersonal cosmic force etc. They might be unbelievers on a practical level; nevertheless, they are not atheists in the sense that they reject the existence of any kind of supernatural reality. See: Davie (2007); Smith (2017): 234.

²⁸ Smith (2008): 14.

that demands justification and explanation, whereas in many milieus unbelief goes unquestioned.²⁹

Religious and Secular Ways of Justifying Moral Norms

The third part of this contribution will deal with the example of the ongoing relevance of Christian ethics, emphasized by Smith in his book *A Short History of Secularism*. According to Smith, the evidence of the presence of Christian ethics in contemporary Western society is a concern about poor people.³⁰ This concern used to be very strong in the medieval society and it was embedded in a religious doctrine, particularly in the teachings concerning the “Seven Works of Mercy.”³¹ Nowadays, caring for the poor, in spite of common shortcomings in the ways of its realization, also functions as an appealing moral norm and that, in Smith’s opinion, testifies to the “ethical persistence of Christianity” in secular societies. As Smith claims:

[T]he point is that there is a close affinity between Western contemporary and medieval ethics. *The same principle of concern for the poor and weakest underpins both societies.* So we can hazard, with a recognition of the need for more explanation later, that a further feature of Western secular society is an ethics grounded within and dependent upon medieval Christianity. In other words, the ethics of secularism is in essence Christian.³²

I would like to elaborate on this example, referring to the distinction between moral values and the ways of justifying them,³³ and to criticize Smith’s thesis. The interpretation of moral ideals – their meaning and their scope – is largely dependent on the ways of justifying them. To illustrate this idea, let us focus on the right to life. Depending on the worldview we hold, the right to life will be justified in various ways which can lead to different interpretations of it. For a secular humanist, the dignity of human beings as rational agents may serve as the basis of

²⁹ Taylor (2007): 12-13, 437, 531; Casanova (2013): 30.

³⁰ Smith (2008): 119.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Ibidem: 234 (italics – D.B.)

³³ This distinction is used by Taylor when he discusses Rawls’s conception of the “overlapping consensus.” As Taylor says: “what looks like the same schedule of rights may easily be understood somewhat differently when set against the background of [...] different views. The basic fact underlying this diversity is that a political ethic doesn’t interpret itself, any more than a charter of rights does. As it extends to further cases, it will be interpreted in the light of the entire background of justification from which it springs. When there are several such backgrounds, the interpretations are going to diverge, often seriously.” Taylor (1998): 49–50.

this right. Christians may justify this right by means of the belief that human life is God's gift and merits protection. A *utilitarian* can claim that we, as sensitive human beings, strive for pleasure and avoid suffering. In spite of the common acceptance of the right to life in a general form, the existence of various ways to justify this right will lead to its different applications to particular issues. This fact will contribute to numerous controversies over such issues as, for instance, abortion or euthanasia. Despite the general consensus with regard to certain moral norms (the right to life, the concern about the needy etc.), there are disagreements as to what exactly these norms mean due to the various ways of justifying them.

I believe that the distinction between moral norms and the ways of justifying them can be related to the discussion about the attitude towards poor people in medieval and modern society. To illustrate my point, I will refer to the analyses of a Polish historian, Bronisław Geremek.

Geremek in his book *Poverty: A History*³⁴ describes the most common approaches to poor people in medieval society as well as the change of these approaches in modernity. In the Middle Ages, poverty had – in Geremek's opinion – “an internal spiritual value.” A voluntary resignation from wealth would lead to salvation, and giving alms would be the realization of the way to redemption. By helping the poor one would in fact help Christ himself. The rich were supporting the poor whereas the poor were providing the rich with an opportunity to be sanctified.

At the beginning of the 16th century, in response to the growing number of poor people coming to European cities, the so-called “Poor Laws” were established to regulate the issues of helping the poor. The new regulations reflected a fundamental change of attitude towards poor people. In the new perspective, religious mercy is counterbalanced by an instrumental and coercive approach to the poor. Apart from resocialization and being taught a profession, beggars were also strictly punished and put in custodies. Despite the fact that this “politics of closure” was based on strong religious motivations – “striving to make a worthy living possible for the poor,” these motivations are later displaced by coercive and controlling factors. According to Geremek, the departure from perceiving poverty from the angle of the sacred has become one of the characteristic features of the modern society. As Geremek writes:

[T]he most important factors in determining ideological attitudes towards poverty, and to a great extent also the social status of the poor, are to be found in the sphere

³⁴ Geremek (1997).

of the sacred, a fundamental source of differences in the medieval and modern approaches to the problems of poverty.³⁵

The continuous presence of certain moral norms that were erstwhile entrenched in Christianity (e.g. helping the poor as an act of religious mercy) does not have to show that Christian ethics occupy the central place in the Western culture. Even if one claims that the modern ideal of helping the poor has its sources in medieval society, this ideal can nowadays function (and actually functions) quite independently of the religious context. It results from the fact that throughout the last centuries we managed to invent secular ways of justifying it that are alternative to the religious ones. At the same time these new frameworks determine the meaning and scope of the ideal of helping the poor. This standpoint allows to understand Geremek's thesis according to which the departure from seeing the problem of poverty from the perspective of the sacred changes common attitudes towards poor people. I do not want to claim that instrumentalism in treating the poor follows inevitably from the acceptance of secular moral reasons, nor that religious motives have completely vanished. Selflessness and altruism can be ascribed to actions inspired by secular ethics. Many people are also committed to helping the needy on the grounds of religious motives. However, religion is not the only moral source available for members of diverse modern societies of the Western world.

My point is that religious and secular norms can converge and *prima facie* they might be seen as the same. However, we need to bear in mind that the meaning and scope of a given norm is determined by a broader vision in which it is embedded. Thus, moral ideals that are justified by religious reasons cannot be identified with the moral ideals that stem from secular background. But of course this does not rule out the possibility of an overlap between them.

As a matter of fact, the case of helping the poor can be generalized and traced back to other moral ideals that are of crucial importance to the Western modernity, for instance individualism and human dignity. Despite the fact that the historical roots of those ideals can be derived from Christianity – as it has been shown by Siedentop – the Enlightenment thinkers (e.g. Rousseau, Kant) formulated secular conceptions that provided a different justification and *eo ipso* meaning of these ideals. Taylor shows that moral and spiritual pluralism of the contemporary age is closely related to the emergence of “exclusive humanism” in the Enlightenment. In *A Secular Age* he shows that exclusive humanism was the first sig-

³⁵ Ibidem: 7.

nificant moral alternative to religion. He understands exclusive humanism as a family of conceptions which are based on a secular or immanent vision of human “fullness.” These conceptions describe “our highest moral capacity [...], without reference to God.”³⁶ One can notice the difference between an exclusive humanist and an atheist. The former does not have to reject the existence of God. I think that exclusive humanism could be equated with “practical atheism” that consists in leading one’s life *etsi Deus non daretur* (as if God did not exist). Taylor claims that secular conceptions of human fullness were a “functional replacement” for the Christian notion of *agape*. In other words, the essential feature of exclusive humanism is universal benevolence which also included the concern about the poor. As he writes:

[B]enevolence and universal concern are precisely the hallmarks of eighteenth century exclusive humanism, or perhaps we might say, of the humanism which turned exclusive; of utilitarianism, or the theory of Kant; or the Enlightenment proponents of the rights of man, and of a new dispensation based on general human happiness and welfare.³⁷

It is important to note that the birth of exclusive humanism cannot be perceived as a simple takeover or secularization of the genuinely theological concepts. The secular visions of fullness are based on new and original conceptions of human agency that opened up new possibilities of moral experience. Those conceptions are very influential today not only among intellectuals but also on the level of the general public. To the extent that they have shaped the social imaginary of the contemporary culture, we are – for better or worse – the heirs of the Enlightenment.

The Moral Pluralism of the Western Culture

I agree with Smith that the emergence of the Western modernity cannot be understood as a “removal of Christianity by secularism.”³⁸ I think he is also right when he claims that Christianity remains a “significant cultural force” in contemporary societies.³⁹ However, I cannot concur that, as Smith argues, “dominant Western social imaginary conducts its major ethical debates within the framework

³⁶ Taylor (2007): 245.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ Smith (2017): 229.

³⁹ *Ibidem*: 238.

of Christian theology.”⁴⁰ One of the premises of his position lies in his view on the Enlightenment. According to his interpretation, the crucial shift that took place during that period, which has consequences for our condition, consisted in the rise of “scientific mentality” that “complemented the established Christian ethical norms.”⁴¹

However, this account of the Enlightenment seems to be unsatisfactory for at least two reasons. First, it ignores the important changes that occurred in the sphere of morality as a result of which religious faith was questioned. Of course, the Enlightenment is not a unitary historical phenomenon. One can distinguish between “moderate” and “radical” trends of this cultural formation.⁴² Whereas the proponents of the latter tended towards abandoning religion, the supporters of the former criticized some aspects of religious life (e.g. “superstition”) and aimed at reconceiving it according to rational criteria. Regardless of our stance on what we consider to be the “main face” of the Enlightenment – whether the radical trend should be seen as basic and the moderate one as marginal, or *vice versa* – it is hard to deny that new moral outlooks articulated by influential 18th century thinkers underpin contemporary debates between belief and unbelief.

Second, “scientific mentality” should be seen as a crucially ambiguous concept. On the one hand, it could be something complementary to religious faith (as it was the case with Newton) but on the other – quite on the contrary. As I have tried to show, following Taylor, “scientific mentality” along with the Enlightenment narrative of courageous coming to adulthood underlie Clifford’s ethics of belief. Even if this ethics does not convince many people to accept atheism, it makes religious belief problematic and hence in need of being justified.

For these reasons I think that instead of perceiving the contemporary Western culture through the lenses of “secularism, understood as the triumphant forces

⁴⁰ Ibidem: 238–239.

⁴¹ Ibidem: 237.

⁴² Miklaszewska, Tomaszewska (2014). Jonathan Israel, one of the famous supporters of the idea of the “Radical Enlightenment,” claims: “‘Radical Enlightenment’ and ‘moderate Enlightenment’ are general categories which, it has become evident in recent decades, are unavoidable and essential for any valid discussion of the Enlightenment broadly conceived (1650–1850). [...] ‘Radical Enlightenment’ was neither peripheral to the Enlightenment as a whole, nor dominant, but rather the ‘other side of the coin’ an inherent and absolute opposite, always present and always basic to the Enlightenment as a whole. Several different constructions of ‘Radical Enlightenment’ have been proposed by the main innovators on the topic – Leo Strauss, Henry May, Günter Mühlhpfordt, Margaret Jacob, Gianni Paganini, Martin Mulson, and Jonathan Israel – but, it is argued here, the most essential element in the definition is the coupling, or linkage, of philosophical rejection of religious authority (and secularism – the elimination of theology from law, institutions, education and public affairs) with theoretical advocacy of democracy and basic human rights.” Israel (2014): 73. See also: Miklaszewska, Tomaszewska (2014): 1–4; Jacob (2014): 99–114.

of rationality” (a position that Smith rightly rejects), or in theological terms (a position that Smith seems to endorse) we will get a more adequate picture of it when we try to look at it as a “fractured culture,” or one which is profoundly “cross-pressured” (if I may borrow Taylor’s notions) between various moral-spiritual stances (belief, unbelief, religious indifference) which have a *sui generis* significance.⁴³

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⁴³ This paper was prepared as a part of the research project *The Enlightenment Ideas of the Freedom of Thought and Conscience, and Contemporary Secularism*, funded by the National Science Centre in Poland, grant no. UMO-2014/15/D/HS1/02751.

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