

Review of *The Secular Conscience: Why Belief Belongs in Public Life*, by Austin Dacey (Prometheus Books, 2008)

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In *The Secular Conscience*, Austin Dacey, an American philosopher and former United Nations representative for the Center for Inquiry, challenges his fellow secular liberals to break their self-inflicted gag order and restore the discussion of ethics and morality to its rightful place in open dialogue.

Drawing on Kant's writings on free will and choice, Dacey contends that secularists' carefully-chosen ethical systems tend to be deeply personal and authentic, quite possibly making them and the broader secular conscience stronger and more sincere than dogma-based religious morality. Combine this depth of commitment with the heavy emphasis on separation of church and state so important to progressive secularists, and the result is too often silence and a lack of participation in public debate, thus allowing the religious to have the floor in public discussion regarding ethics and morals at the expense of the voice of their secular counterparts.

Theologians and the religious do not, of course, have a monopoly on morality, but they do tend to have a stronger voice in public dialogue. Dacey asserts that well-meaning, though misguided, notions of tolerance and politeness combined with postcolonial guilt have led not to greater understanding, but to a dangerous silence and acquiescence. Consider how often we bow out of potentially uncomfortable conversations with a statement along the lines of, "We all have a right to our own opinion." It is this self-censorious attitude to which Dacey objects. To illustrate his point, he introduces the idea of the Privacy Fallacy – the assumption that matters of conscience are strictly private and should remain so, in every sense. Riding sidecar to the Privacy Fallacy is the Liberty Fallacy, or the assumption that religious beliefs have a special immunity to public critique. These assumptions are strong among liberals, and pervasive enough to keep secular progressives silent even in the face of irrationality and blatant intolerance. Religious beliefs and practices are given a free pass, and religious groups end up being over-represented in the public sphere. The aim should not be to remove religion from public discussion of ethics, Dacey argues, but to bring rationality to the table in equal measure. In a peculiar twist, liberal-minded secularists have become victims of their own ideals, quietly allowing anyone with religious beliefs the tolerance and acceptance so rarely granted to atheists, agnostics, and anyone speaking publicly of secular morality.

While conscience-related matters certainly are private in the sense that they cannot be governed or regulated, and while they are protected from governmental coercion thanks to separation of church and state, Dacey asserts that these matters were never truly meant to be private in the sense that they should not be discussed openly and publicly. Conscience itself is deeply personal and deeply private, but its exercise – the practice of living (and speaking) by one's principles – is action-based and therefore public in nature. Using a helpful comparison of open conscience to the open press, Dacey explains that both are

protected from control by governmental and other authoritarian forces, and asserts that conscience, like the press, should be open for discussion, criticism, and debate. Dacey's arguments are at their strongest and most persuasive when he stresses that vocalizing matters of conscience must be encouraged while remaining free from coercion, but never from criticism or judgment. After all, a strongly held and rationally chosen ethical conviction can certainly withstand the bullets of public criticism. Open dialogue and debate are not the enemy of tolerance – in fact, they make conscience stronger and help keep it free from autocratic control.

Dacey endorses equality and tolerance, but not at the expense of liberty. Writing heatedly on the topic of theological Islam, he states that “Islamism is the new totalitarianism” and challenges secular liberals to end the practice of shying away from open condemnation of the inequities and abuses common in modern Islamic cultures. The history and practice of Islam, he writes, is simply too complicated to be either vilified as cruel and vicious or oversimplified as a religion of peace with no political entanglements – a dichotomy that often rears its head in the discussion of Islam. All too rarely is theological Islam openly spoken of as what it is – misunderstood, flawed, overly politicized, and often misrepresented.

While Dacey's assertions on Islam could easily be misrepresented as inflammatory, he is, in fact, simply exercising the central premise of his book – that religion is not and should not be protected from criticism. In the spirit of Dacey's fellow activist and Islam critic Ayaan Hirsi Ali's famous “tolerance of intolerance is cowardice” statement, Dacey refuses to hide behind the illusion of tolerance at the price of freedom. He is at his most eloquent when he writes about the strength of secular ethics. He asserts clearly that religions, as collections of ideas and sets of ideological standards open to acceptance or rejection, do not deserve respect; *people* deserve respect. By definition, respect cannot take the form of blind acceptance. Instead, respect is the practice of understanding of another's beliefs and actions, and holding others to the same standards to which we make ourselves accountable. This practice is, in fact, beyond acceptance. We may disagree with those whose beliefs differ from our own, and we may do so publicly, but provided that it's a two-way dialogue protected from authoritarian control, the result is likely to lead to thought-provoking dialogue and greater understanding of both points of view.

Dacey challenges secular liberals to speak up – to publicly voice their moral and ethical views and to defend reason and scientific thought in a more public manner. Questions about abortion, gay marriage, and embryonic stem-cell research all belong in public debate. These are difficult matters to discuss, but they are matters of importance to the public dialogue, and secular liberals must give voice to the seriousness of these issues in public debate rather than retreating out of deference to a distorted ideal of tolerance. In the end, Dacey's message is an uplifting one: people are capable of fairness and compassion, our shared human ethics are intuitive and sincere, and conscience is important enough to deserve a place in the public sphere – in other words, it is worth speaking up for.