



## Religion and Politics

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Rabbi Dr Shimon Cowen studies the most fundamental question of both ancient and modern political philosophy: should political authority be based on the claims of revelation or reason, Jerusalem or Athens?

Cowen considers a morality based solely on reason an absurdity, but he goes beyond merely rejecting secularism, instead seeking to replace it with a universal ethics founded on biblical tradition.

He also takes as his topic the spiritual health of contemporary society. He sees plenty of symptoms of ill-health: family breakdown, hedonism and the collapse of sexual mores. His prescription is for laws that seek to restore spiritual health.



In a more limited sense, Rabbi Cowen seeks to reassert a place for religion in the public square. He finds the secular notion of a separation between religion and politics hollow, whilst acknowledging the important institutional separation between church and state.

Considering the secularism of the New Atheists, Cowen sees their ultimate goal as the complete relegation of religion from public life, not only from the state but also civil society, until the only place where religiosity is permitted is in the private thoughts of the believer. He finds this animus lurking behind moves to prohibit religious schools from hiring teachers according to their own criteria, opening these schools up to litigation under equal opportunity laws.

Rabbi Cowen's case is firmest when he confronts this ideology of enforced secularisation and lays bare its underlying motives. He also persuasively refutes the modernist notion that morality springs from reason; that morality is primarily a subject for the intellect.

According to Cowen, any attempt to place a scheme of universally valid moral values on a bedrock of reason will prove futile. Ultimately, the modernist will be forced to acknowledge this, but having rejected tradition (or divine revelation) as the fount of morality, he will seek to replace the resulting void by denying the validity of morality altogether, and seek a guide to human action in supposedly universal rules of history. Thus, historicism becomes an anaemic substitute for morality.

Cowen points out that today's left either forgets or outright rejects the religious origins of the values they subscribe to. For instance, the very notion of a separation of religion and political authority is Christian in origin. They downplay the role of religion in the great social progresses of modern history: the anti-slavery movement, prison reform and the treatment of the mentally ill. They are blind to the connection between modern concepts of human rights and Judeo-Christian concepts of natural rights and natural law.

They even go further, making the case that religion is a force for evil, that it has for the most part stood against scientific and social progress, and is the primary cause for war.

Cowen's case against this aggressive secularism is robust, and he is likely to find many liberalpluralist allies. However, Cowen goes one step further, making a case for combining the universal ethics of religion with our positive laws. In this he understates the case for allowing society to regulate behaviour through moral censure rather than law.

For instance, Cowen equates making something permissible under law with condoning it. But it is not true to say that what is legal is also normative or that something which is currently illegal will be beyond censure if state coercion no longer prevents it.

In all societies, from the most permissive to the most restrictive, shame is a more common means to enforce conventional behaviour than positive law. That this is rarely acknowledged only demonstrates how little we consciously reflect upon the various conventions we obey at every moment of our lives-from how to speak in polite society to how to structure the day- and their



countless adaptations to concrete circumstances that make civilised life possible.

To live, like the secular rationalist professes to live, weighing up which is the rational course of action (or for that matter, the legal course of action) in all circumstances would become impossible. As David Hume found, humanity is therefore chiefly regulated by habit.

But equally, progress springs from the ability of a select few to brave the opprobrium of their peers and conceive different manners of living. This is the chief argument against laws that regulate lifestyle: they leave no room for experiments in living. How can the difference between the eccentric and the prophet be revealed if neither is free to break from convention?

In truth, new and better ways of living cannot be discovered if we are subject to a uniformity enforced by law.

While basic universal ethics underlying conduct within civilised society is necessary, if not sacrosanct, the vital question remains unanswered by Cowen: can a society's spiritual health be restored through changes to its positive laws? Or, rather, is this beyond the limits of politics?