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## **Atheism, secularism and toleration – towards a political atheology**

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### **Abstract**

There are numerous existing political atheologies that can be characterised by three movements – negative, positive, and critical atheological projects. By focusing on the critical atheologies of two political theorists, Richard Rorty and William Connolly, this article presents an insider’s view of the influence that atheism has on political thought. After drawing out just what makes Rorty and Connolly’s philosophies atheological, this article sets itself the task of drawing the consequences of a critical atheology for two fundamental concepts of contemporary political theory: secularism and toleration. These Enlightenment ideals can be rescued and re-framed following a pluralist critique. By refining our understanding of secularism beyond a strict church-state separation, an agonistic secularism which promotes an ethos of engagement is defended therein. Secondly, toleration is then defended in its agonistic form to include the practice of critique against conceptions of indifference or respect. Finally, the hard case of the French ban on veils in public schools is discussed to highlight the contribution of this political atheology to an important social issue.

### **Keywords:**

Atheism, secularism, toleration, agonism, Rorty, Connolly, veil

## **Atheism, secularism and toleration – towards a political atheology**

Contemporary political theorists have analysed the impact of religious belief on the conceptualisations of toleration and secularism, highlighting the nuances that particular interpretations of Christian (Schwartzman, 2005, De Roover and Balagangadhara, 2008), Muslim (March 2010), Jewish (Fraenkel, 2010), Hindu (Spinner-Halev, 2005, De Roover et al., 2011) and other religious beliefs have contributed to our thinking of these concepts (McLennan, 2010). Yet there are no systematic studies of the role that atheism plays in contemporary political theory. This article seeks to remedy this bias, and proposes to build on a three-fold understanding of atheology that I have already defended elsewhere (Develennes 2014). By understanding the term ‘atheology’ as a three-fold movement characterised by a negative phase (a-theology), a positive phase (atheo-logy), and a critical phrase (metatheology), I propose to draw out the consequences of the last of these phases for political theory today. In the first section of this article, after a brief analysis of the negative and positive phases of atheology, I turn to the critical phase that has the most potential to contribute in original ways to important debates on secularism and toleration. It is essential, for this task, to take seriously the work of atheists themselves, and not impose an understanding of atheism from the outside. The focus on two major political theorists that have vocally defended their atheism (or non-theism, in Connolly’s case), helps bring clarity to the debate and draw out nuances that were lacking from the negative and positive phases of atheology. In particular, by drawing out Rorty’s and Connolly’s conceptualisation of atheism (and nontheism) vis-à-vis religion, it will become clear that we need to consider atheism (alongside religious belief) as an essential influence behind political thought. Atheism will also be studied as an existential belief, in many ways on par with other (religious) existential beliefs. In the second part of this article, I propose to discuss secularism from an atheological standpoint, in order to propose that a political atheology can defend a concept of agonistic secularism, which answers separate issues found in Rorty’s defence of, and Connolly’s critique of secularism. I will show that secularism demands too much when it insists upon the exclusion of private beliefs from the public sphere, and too little when it perceives the separation of church and state as the model of government. In the third part of this article, I propose a theory of toleration that attempts to move past a liberal understanding of toleration so often criticised in contemporary political thought, and to hang on to critique which Connolly’s emphasis on respect seems to preclude. Finally, this article will illustrate how such a political atheology – with its agonistic secularism and toleration – can revisit a test-

case for contemporary political thought: that of the ban on the Muslim veil in France. Against the defence of the veil as a matter of protection of young women, this article will demonstrate that the atheology proposed here provides a new critical argument against the ban. In particular, it will show that atheists, as a minority, have crossover interests with other religious groups, in this case Muslims. I will then argue that the French ban on veils discriminates positively against atheists – but perhaps not for long – and raises issues of fairness that atheists cannot ignore. Lastly, I will argue that atheists should be particularly weary of restrictions on freedom of expression, as their central concept of critical scepticism depends on it.

### **I A three-fold political atheology**

One can identify three distinct phases of atheism, both historical and contemporary. They can be conceptualised as negative (a-theism), with an emphasis on a critique of theism and of the social consequences of religion; as positive (athe-ism), as attempts to build a positive philosophy that does not use God or the divine as a basis; and as critical (meta-theism), as an attempt to move past the dialectic for theism-atheism towards a philosophy that has gone past both God and its negation (Develennes, 2014). The first two phases of atheism are discussed here, and the third part will be given more attention in subsequent parts as Rorty and Connolly's thoughts largely fit within this critical phase.

The new atheists – Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens – have spearheaded a movement aiming at the desanctification of God, religion, and faith in the twenty-first century. Although characterised as 'new', their atheism is often a repetition of much older arguments, such as those found in the posthumous memoirs of Jean Meslier, an eighteenth century Catholic priest who denounced his faith and avowed his atheism – for the first time in Western history (Moëne, 2003, Israel, 2006: 767). What is the significance, for political theory, of this particular kind of polemical atheism? I suggest here that the new atheists have a powerful negative role, and that these self-appointed defenders of disbelief re-contextualise atheistic critiques of the Enlightenment. Their negative critiques also have

severe limitations, however (Wilde, 2010). Their emphasis on anti-religious arguments, antagonistic positions against all faiths, reliance on scientific rationalism, and defence of strict secularism remain weak and unconvincing – even from within atheology.

Contemporary atheists continue this critique of kleptocracy that originated in eighteenth-century atheism, attacking the alliance between the prince and the priest, still relevant today (Dennett, 2007: 171-2). The fighting of wars in the name of religion (Dawkins, 2006: 278), including by George W. Bush when he was president of the United States (Harris, 2004: 47), is at the very least problematised by an atheology worthy of its name. The virtual impossibility of a honest atheist to hold office in the United States (Dawkins, 2006: 45), the labelling of entire people, and especially of children, as members of a religious community (Dawkins, 2006: 278), the existence of religious fanaticism (Dennett, 2007: 299), the punishment of apostasy (Harris, 2004: 115), blasphemy laws on the statute book in the UK until 2008 (Dawkins, 2006: 289), the issue of euthanasia (Dawkins, 2006: 356), the link between the death penalty, and criminal justice in general and belief in free will (Harris, 2004: 157), policies on stem cell research (Harris, 2004: 167), the pursuing of abstinence-only sexual education (Harris 2004: 168); the list could go on and on... There are still, on many levels, political decisions and debates that take place on a religious basis.

The task of an atheology is to move beyond this (nonetheless necessary) negative phase in order to construct a positive formulation of the political. It is not self-evident, however, that atheists can agree on a positive doctrine (Ysseldyk et al, 2012). The example of Jean Meslier and the baron d’Holbach, two eighteenth-century thinkers, testifies to this difficulty. Meslier (2009), the communalist thinker who thinks at the level of the parish, is in many ways opposed to Holbach (2004), the republican thinker that thinks about Europe – if not the world – as a whole. Beyond the reaction by both authors to the political abuses of religion in their times, it is not obvious that their atheism necessarily contributes to a united

political doctrine. It is thus better to speak of different political atheologies than a unified atheology, though there are potential areas of agreement between these atheist thinkers.

Firstly, the critique of uselessness in both Meslier and Holbach leads to a valuation of utility as a political value. More developed in the thought of Holbach, this utilitarian politics aims at providing a positive guidance based on principles that are not grounded in religion or guaranteed by God. An atheology is not necessarily a political philosophy for atheists. Because atheists discuss the relations between humans qua humans, and not with respect to their orthodoxy to particular belief-systems, they always maintain a potentially universal (or at least cross-religious) aspect. This is certainly true of Holbach's utilitarian 'Ethocracy', where utility's universal appeal nevertheless remains a malleable concept and the interest of "greatest number" is never self-evident in the baron's thought. Once the meaning of interest is problematised, utility acts as an immanent concern that all societies share, although each remains the judge of its interpretation. In other words, utility is not necessarily a principle of uniformity, as it also demands that different circumstances be treated differently – Holbach's ethocratic republic is also a pragmatist and pluralist republic. Utility can act as a critical tool, it points to the question of interest in the political realm. Asking the question 'Cui bono?' is central to political thought, and a utilitarian politics attempts to ensure that it is answered with 'the greatest number'. Rorty's pragmatism, in many ways, continues this tradition of atheistic concern for human well-being. This utilitarian, or even pragmatist principle is certainly never above critique, as Hannah Arendt's question: 'And what is the use of use?' (1961: 80) remains a potentially fatal challenge to it. When utility is coupled with a pragmatic outlook, it can however provide a framework for political institutions.

There is thus a potential for a positive dimension to political atheologies. Richard Dawkins, more famous for his negative and aggressive atheism, has also attempted to make a positive contribution through the creation of his 'Non-Believers Giving Aid' (2010). Alain de

Botton's call for the creation of an atheist temple in London, the creation of a National Atheist Party and the First Church of Atheism in the United States, are all part of this drive by atheists to encroach on religious monopoly of certain social and political spheres. They are certainly limited in several respects: they mimic religious institutions, are largely limited to a voluntarist model of private associations, often claim to represent all atheists despite diversity in atheistic beliefs, and remain largely reactionary towards religion. They also assume a model of rational agency that has faced multiple lines of attack – from more theologically-inclined philosophers such as MacIntyre and Ricœur (1969), and Taylor (2007) – but also from atheological thinkers.

Two of the most influential political theorists of the past decades have been vocal – if at times ambiguous – defenders of a critical version of atheism. Richard Rorty, a self-avowed atheist, and William Connolly, who prefers the label of nontheist, have made valuable contributions that largely supersede the contributions of 'new atheists' to political theory. As Charles Guignon and David Hiley (2003: 30) have rightly noted, Rorty's project can be accurately described as an attempt to draw the consequences of an atheist position. This is reflected in Rorty's repeated identification with an atheistic position. Rorty clearly felt that his thought was influenced by his atheism, and his thought can be appropriately described as an atheology. As I will show, Rorty's positions on secularism and toleration, in particular, have been widely informed by the kind of rationalist Enlightenment he wishes to build on and overcome. First, let me turn to the link that can be seen between Rorty's pragmatist position and his atheism.

In Rorty's early works, notably the essays published in *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982), the pragmatist does not look very much like an atheist. The figure of the secularist that he defends then is indeed sceptical about the existence of God, but does not

deny it (1982: xiv). The pragmatist here perceives questions about Truth, Goodness, Nature, Will, and God as empty metaphysical statements. They are at best useful as metaphors and rhetoric, at worst dangerous when taken seriously (1982: xvii). This is why Wallach (1987) could describe Rorty's thought as closer to agnosticism than atheism. The pragmatist, as such, is not necessarily an atheist – she does not need to deny the existence of God, or express a belief in the nonexistence of God – but needs to be, at the very least, a sceptic. What Rorty (1982: 24) draws our attention to is that the secularisation of certain religious concepts, such as the will of God, into non-religious formulations – the moral law – is not straightforward for any sceptic, whether she is an atheist or not. Furthermore, Rorty's criticism of the notion of human nature, still permeating liberal thought, as emanating from a Christian conception of the Brotherhood of Man, suggests that one needs to be sceptical of Christian claims per se; since they might enforce our prejudices into an established metaphysical web of power (1982: 207).

The consequences of Rorty's political theory are expanded upon in his later works. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty builds on his radical scepticism towards divine truth, whether in theological or secularised form. Rorty's scepticism is extended to the ontological unity still found in the approaches to the natural world, and to conceptions of individuality that take the self for a final and united entity outside of social relations. With respect to the divinisation of the natural world, Rorty is certainly going further than eighteenth-century atheists, notably Meslier and Holbach, for whom matter still had a fixed ontology, while Rorty is surely closer to Hume's radical scepticism. Rorty's de-divinisation of the individual has important consequences for political thought, and earned him, from some commentators, the label of being a 'communitarian' (Wallach, 1987: 581). What his thought does point to is that our conceptions of our selves are never acquired ex nihilo, but come from a particular engagement with a tradition, and in certain cases a reaction to it.



Rorty is not a conservative ‘communitarian,’ as his ideal of self-creation, with its Nietzschean roots, implies one’s ability to free oneself from cultural prejudices. His inter-subjective conception of agency, in other words, is one that must be embedded in an agonistic social setting, where particular Weltanschauungen struggle against one another for social approval.

These two movements of de-divinisation, in other words, have consequences for Rorty’s atheology. In the first place, Rorty’s contingent conception of nature proposes a powerful alternative to think about political theory. If nature is contingent, as Rorty proposes, there are important consequences that emanate from this claim. One needs to go further than Rorty to draw them out, however. Quentin Meillassoux’s speculative realism is here a vital work that draws the consequences of contingency for philosophy. The realism side of Meillassoux’s thought highlights the reality of a world ‘out there’, while the speculative side insists on our inability to grasp it fully through human reason, and on the necessarily speculative nature of our attempts to know the world. Rorty’s contingent social hope can be described in similar terms. There are material conditions that need to be improved for human beings, but every attempt to describe these – and the way they should be improved – is bound to be speculative. For Meillassoux, the necessity of contingency has radical atheological conclusions. ‘[T]his something, that Chaos will never produce, is a necessary being. Everything can be produced, everything can happen – except something necessary’ (2006: 89). In other words, God, whether it is the theistic, deistic, or even pantheistic God, is no longer possible under the conditions of the necessity of contingency. Rorty had not gone this far, but contingency after Meillassoux makes most Western conceptions of deities impossible.<sup>1</sup>

In the second place, Rorty’s inter-subjective conception of agency means that an atheist’s vocabulary is taken not as a final movement in the history of ideas, not as the ultimate emancipation from theological thought, but as situated in a struggle against other

belief-systems that seek to impose counter-claims on the political. Within the framework of a liberal democracy, this means recognising others' claims to similarly contingent vocabularies, and the legitimacy of their views. This is the reason why toleration is so prominent in Rorty's political thought (Bernstein, 1987: 542). Furthermore, this type of atheology makes the claim that attempts to unify – under one national, religious or ethnic banner – the realm of the political are likely to lead to intolerance. Liberalism seeks a *modus vivendi* of sorts, but it cannot seek one conception of the good, nor can it hope to find a conception of justice agreeable on the same terms by all citizens. This is the basis for Rorty's defence of the Jeffersonian compromise, a strict separation of religion and politics, which seeks to privatise religion and keep it away from the public square.

We atheists, doing our best to enforce Jefferson's compromise, think it bad enough that we cannot run for public office without being disingenuous about our disbelief in God; despite the compromise, no uncloseted atheist is likely to get elected anywhere in the country. (Rorty, 1999: 169)

The Jeffersonian compromise, in other words, is already detrimental to publicly spirited atheists in the United States. A challenge to that compromise is likely to lead to an even worse situation for them, and strict secularism is defended as a minimum condition for a political atheology. Rorty's secularism also continues with the Enlightenment scepticism about the usefulness of priests. In one of his final works, Rorty shows some regrets for having described himself as an 'atheist' (Rorty and Vattimo, 2005, 33). He seems to have changed his mind, but only in terms of rhetorical force. For the label he prefers, 'anticlericalism', is selected precisely because of its political dimension. Against those atheists who see their atheism as an empirical hypothesis, Rorty prefers atheists that see their atheism as a political view, and are tolerant of privatised religion. His ideal atheist, in other words, is a political atheist who defends the Jeffersonian compromise.

Rorty's strict secularism, however, is weak on several accounts. For instance, he has been widely criticised for refusing to provide grounds or foundations for his liberalism – thus

weakening his political doctrine by a spurious appeal to a public/private distinction. This distinction, Wallach has argued (1987: 599), excludes deep moral and political discourses, which his inter-subjective conception of agency would seem to require. Connolly also provides a potent challenge to Rorty's strong secularism, as I will show. A strict separation of religion and the public sphere is by no means a guarantee that religious belief does not permeate public decisions.

William Connolly's attitude towards atheism is much more ambiguous than Rorty's, and his thought is not as straightforwardly put within an "atheology" as I do here. There is room, as I will show, to characterise his thought as atheological – he does so himself at times – and his ambiguity towards dogmatic atheism is a powerful reminder of the limitations that atheism as political doctrine faces.

Why is Connolly so ambiguous towards atheists? One needs to go into the footnotes to find out why.

A last "theological" point: Although there are powerful pressures binding the command and design traditions to the authority of a god, a "post-Nietzschean" ethic need not resist every conception of divinity. A god as "absence," for instance, might be compatible with a post-Nietzschean sensibility. So might some versions of polytheism. I prefer "nontheistic reverence for the ambiguity of being." (Connolly, 1993: 385)

Instead of a categorical resistance against every conception of divinity, Connolly inscribes himself in a tradition of nontheism. This preference for nontheism is repeated in a number of places in Connolly's work. Against Kant's dogmatic knowledge of God, simply postulated as a necessity for morality, Connolly (2000: 600) identifies a tradition – in Kant's time – that 'supported a nontheistic ethic of cultivation'. The 'nontheist Nietzsche' (Connolly, 2005b: 882) is the leading figure of this tradition, and Connolly (1999: 16) contends that the 'nontheistic enchantment with the world provides one valuable source of [...] a generous ethos of engagement in a post-secular society'. A nontheistic philosophy, in other words, is

more compatible with the agonistic conception of democracy that Connolly promotes, as opposed to an atheistic position that tends to strive on antagonism (Wenman, 2012).

It is this antagonistic and reactionary atheism that Connolly rejects. ‘The problem of evil within faith, as I will call it, is not confined to Augustinianism and Qutbism. Atheists are capable of it, too’ (Connolly, 2005a: 19). The scene is set for Connolly’s disagreements with (a particular strand of) atheism – the one that partakes in a faith tradition that identifies the problem of the existence of God as one of certainty, as an opposition between Truth and Falsehood, Orthodoxy and Heresy. An attempt to build atheism as a certainty against the error of God-belief, in other words, is merely an offshoot of an Augustinian understanding of faith. Coupled with a reliance on scientific method as the only mode of knowledge, it leads to a devastatingly modern claim about the non-existence of God. ‘The idea that there is a single clear “logic of atheism” is itself the product of a modern binary – belief or unbelief in a supernatural being’ (Connolly, 2005a: 17). Yet such claims by ‘scientific’ atheists are defunct, even by internal discussions within the philosophy of science. Dawkins’ insistence that ‘evolution is a fact’ is in fact bad science – evolution is actually the best falsifiable theory that helps to explain a wide range of facts. Similarly, Connolly (2005a: 83) points out that ‘recent conceptions of science developed by Ilya Prigogine and Stephen Wolfram’ are far closer to philosophical understandings of a pluralistic universe than attempts to find a unified scientific method suggest. Against a conception of science as one based on immutable laws, and linear causality, Connolly promotes an philosophy of science which includes ‘the themes of complexity, distributive agency, connectionism, open systems, and time as becoming’ (Connolly, 2011: 37). The antagonism between science and faith that some of the most rationalist atheists want to promote can be described as an oversimplification of science. Against these conceptions, Connolly argues that ‘exclusionary variants of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and atheism could all profit from going through the Enlightenment’

(2005a:52). In other words, the Enlightenment can and should be saved, because it largely relied on a tradition of doubt, including self-doubt about one's beliefs.

Connolly is not opposed to all kinds of atheism, which makes a reading of his work as an atheology possible. His defence of the atheist is as potent as his attack on dogmatic atheism. 'The historic, American/Christian/Tocquevillian constitution of "the atheist" as amoral, selfish, restless, materialistic, and morally unreliable' is untenable in his ethos of engagement (Connolly, 1999: 158). Using the example of Bertrand Russell, who could not get an academic appointment in the United States because of his atheism, Connolly rightfully points out that a strict secularist position has the adverse effect of ruling out 'the distinctive contributions public atheists might make to public life' (1999: 159). This parallels Rorty's point about the bias against atheists in public life in the United States. Connolly's post-secularism, however, is a challenge to Rorty's strict secularist position. The 'secular is more bound up with generic characteristics of Christian culture than its most enthusiastic proponents acknowledge' (Connolly, 1999: 19), and this may pose particular problems against minorities – atheists, of course, since they are in a minority, but also minority religious groups. Connolly's point about the Christian roots of secularism can be questioned from an atheological position, as it will become clear in the third section.

Connolly's opposition to atheism is clearer: he is against the self-assured, dogmatic atheism that rests on claims to truth about the non-existence of God that resemble Augustinian conceptions of faith. Against this, Connolly (2005a: 4) proposes to talk about his own faith, understood as a creed, a doctrine, an ideology or a philosophy. He labels it a nontheistic faith (2005a: 22). Connolly's nontheism is thus not incompatible with a particular strand of atheism, as it is possible for an atheist to avoid the most dangerous side of dogmatism. I have argued elsewhere that a consistently atheistic position is antithetical to positing the truth of the inexistence of God. This atheology is a radical sceptical position to

begin with, and it doubts divinised concepts, including secularised versions of theological conceptions – Truth, Reason and Science.<sup>ii</sup> Without abandoning the non-divinised versions of these concepts, the atheologist insists that truths are always partial to one's position, that human reason is neither divine nor perfect, and that science is a human activity with all its usual limitations. A consistently atheological position, in other words, is not only sceptical of the concept of God, but of the very need for metaphysical unity that is behind such a concept. Atheology is thus pluralised, and no longer conceives of its position dogmatically – as proving the non-existence of God – but as a particular belief in the non-existence of God. The distinction between Connolly's nontheist and the atheist is blurred, even by Connolly's own standards, when one pluralises atheism.

Accepting Connolly's premise that there is existential faith even within atheism, one can further blur the dichotomies between nontheism and the atheology I propose here. A less unitary conception of atheology accepts that atheism itself is a belief, albeit a belief in the non-existence of God. By accepting the radical situatedness of one's position, the ultimate limitations of human reason, scientific knowledge, and its ability to make claims about the ultimate nature of the universe, this atheology positions itself against the dogmatist atheists. The Augustinian faith that Connolly attacked remains a potent enemy for an atheology, as it is for religious thinkers with radically redefined conceptions of belief or faith, such as Tillich (2001). It is thus an informed opinion which recognises its own contingency that the atheist is here putting forward, rather than a conviction that one's claim is an absolute Truth. One can, as Connolly does, hang on to a Tillichian conception of faith, or one can, as I do, move the debate of an atheology towards the realm of doxa or belief. In this sense it is possible to re-describe Connolly's project as an atheological project, one that critiques dogmatic understandings of atheism, but that nonetheless holds on to its potent critique of Augustinian faith.

Doing so allows the atheist and the theist to pluralise their own self-understanding, and find lines of common agreement against dogmatic understandings of faith. This is what Connolly wants to do through agonistic respect (1999: 8, 2005a: 130, Wenman 2008). This is one of his cardinal virtues under a pluralist regime. By accepting the contingency and plurivocity of one's own being, atheists and theists can perceive each other as adversaries rather than enemies, recognising that they have common adversaries in the most dogmatic among their own lines. 'Atheists and theists, for instance, can now smile together on occasion as each encounters moments of difference within itself from itself' (1999: 156). Once again, agonistic respect can be seen as an attempt to save the Enlightenment demands of toleration by taking some of its limitations seriously. Toleration does not entail the abandonment of one's own beliefs, but merely situates it within an agonistic tradition that reformulates the demands of the Enlightenment with the demands of a pluralistic ethos. One can save this Enlightenment toleration, as I will show in the fourth section, by taking Connolly's point about its horizontal dimension seriously.

## **II Secularism**

There is a tension, as highlighted above, within atheology with regards to secularism. The new atheists defend a strict secularism understood as the separation of church and state. While Rorty is very close to this view, I will show that his perspective is actually a lot more subtle on this issue, and largely informed by his atheology. He points out, indirectly, that traditional secularism demands too little from political engagement. Connolly has taken the limitations of secularism seriously, and he is famous for having defended his non-secularist position – which shows that traditional secularism demands too much. From this complex picture, I will argue that traditional secularism, following the atheologies of Rorty and Connolly, demands both too little and too much. It demands too little when it perceives the separation of church and state as the ultimate model of government, and it demands too much

from the exclusion of our private beliefs from the public sphere. An agonistic secularism on the other hand will allow us to reconceptualise secularism – without abandoning it altogether – by redefining its boundaries as part of a political process.

Rorty's defence of secularism seems at first sight to be relatively straightforward – although it is much more complex than a defence of 'traditional secularism', as I will show. His defence of liberalism as a cultural preference has earned him from many the label of 'communitarian,' and his understanding of liberalism requires a strict separation of religious and political power. 'For in its ideal form, the culture of liberalism would be one which was enlightened, secular, through and through. It would be one in which no trace of divinity remained, either in the form of divinized world or a divinized self' (Rorty, 1989: 15). The first part of this quotation is straightforwardly secular, and can be understood in terms of a strict separation of church and state. Yet the second part of quotation is more ambiguous from a secularist position. A secularist does not necessarily aim to de-divinise the world, just to de-divinise politics. This traditional secularism can be defended from a variety of perspectives – atheistic and theistic – as one of finding a *modus vivendi* within which individuals with different beliefs can co-exist. Yet Rorty's wish to fight a divinised world and divinised self goes further than secularism. This quest is more explicitly atheological, and formulated within a pluralist and agonistic perspective. The quest of an atheology is not merely to fight a particular church's influence over politics but to combat all attempts to impose divinised concepts on others. For Rorty, these divinised concepts include Nature, the Will, and objectivists' belief that language reflects reality (1989: 24). Rorty's secularism is here a challenge to more traditional, non-atheistic defences of secularism. The latter demand too little for Rorty's agonistic pragmatism. Simply separating religion and politics is not enough, for Rorty, as theological concepts permeate all levels of society – including the discipline of philosophy, with which Rorty had notorious difficulties identifying with. One simply does



not leave one's belief in God at home, and walk into the public sphere with de-divinised concepts. One's belief in God – or one's belief in the non-existence of God – informs one's other beliefs, the separation between what lies inside and outside the public sphere is too simplistic indeed.

Connolly has taken this challenge towards secularism seriously. This is because, for Connolly, existential faith – what I would call the beliefs that necessarily underlie one's actions – are not clearly distinguishable between secular and religious beliefs. As he clarifies, 'I do not make the sharp distinction between religious faith and secular reason' (Connolly, 2005a: 27), on the basis that secularism itself is not merely a lack of belief, but a belief at least in its existential dimension. Secularism makes a normative claim about what should be separated – public reason and private faith – which is unsustainable for Connolly. In addition to this separation between reason and faith, 'western secularism emerging from the Enlightenment is today too unalert to the role that enactment, discipline, and ritual play in its own mode of being' (2005a: 52). Although secularism pretends to neutrality, it clearly imposes certain disciplinary restrictions upon individuals that are not themselves neutral, but take sides in favour of a particular conception of agency and faith that is itself deeply engrained in Christian roots. This clashes both with atheists for whom the very concept of salvation is problematic, and minority cultures in the West who do not share this conception of religion as individual faith. The latter is already problematized in political theory, while the former is not. What does an atheology à la Connolly, in other words, tell us about limits of these Christian roots of secularism? For him, secularism demands too much of the separation of private and public spheres. The secularist position adopted by Rawls, for example, is criticised by Connolly because its attempt to de-essentialise faith is unconvincing. As Connolly puts it, there are three components to Rawls' secularism: 1) to refuse the authoritative centre of traditional secularist theory; 2) 'to disconnect belief (but not its

symbolic expression) from devout enactments and ritual performances;’ and 3) to reach a consensus on public justice (Connolly, 2005a: 50). Only the first of these is acceptable for Connolly. The others demand too much of the individual – that they enter public debate by re-phrasing their convictions in rational terms to be understood by all – and ‘rests upon a superficial reading of the complex relation between devotional mood, performance, and belief’ (2005a: 60). Connolly is correct in his assessment, although I would push his argument further by an appeal to hermeneutics: one’s deepest beliefs (metaphysical or philosophical) always already inform one’s political beliefs. To insist on the separation of public reason and private faith is to fool oneself into thinking that simply re-phrasing the terms of one’s beliefs will enable a social compromise (on the meaning of justice, for Rawls). In addition, it may be the case that the secularised public realm obfuscates the dominance of the majority culture. Atheists, among other minorities, have good reasons to be careful about such hidden prejudices. The translation of religious holy days into public holidays, the framing of debates on public health (abortion and euthanasia) as one of a defence of life, and the interdiction of religious symbols in schools (where Christianity does not necessitate a particular orthopraxy as part of religious observance) are all symptoms of such cultural dominance. Notwithstanding whether the value of neutrality is worth saving in the first place (Newey, 1997), secularism’s claim to neutrality grows thinner indeed.

Both Rorty and Connolly provide alternatives to traditional secularism, albeit from different angles. The former tells us that secularism demands too little, while the latter tells us that secularism demands too much. My argument here is that they are both correct in their assessments. From a political atheology’s perspective, secularism demands too little if it does not allow the potent critique of atheism towards divinised beliefs and concepts permeating through public life, and secularism demands too much if it does not allow one to formulate one’s beliefs in one’s own terms. Against such a conception of strict separation of church and

state, a particular kind of secularism can still be defended. It needs to be re-conceptualised as an agonistic secularism, where limitations imposed on public life are part of the debate, and not decided a priori through cultural (and hence often religiously-dominant) preference. As long as a single perspective is not imposed upon all, and as long as no significant minority feels threatened by the secular compromise, the limits of the secular order should be up for political bargaining. What might this agonistic secularism look like? It may still impose limits both on religious influence over public life, and state control of religious life.

### **III Toleration**

Rorty's defence of liberal democracy rests upon his preference for pragmatic and tolerant worldviews, where the individual is left enough space to self-create. As Bernstein (1987) has noted, however, Rorty's view of toleration can be problematic in that it seems to be defined by indifference, while some of Rorty's most 'communitarian' statements are impervious to the intolerant tactics of exclusion behind appealing to a 'we'. Rorty's defence of toleration rests on a relatively strict interpretation of secularism. If secularism is about separating church and state, then toleration is about separating moral judgments from interfering with individual choices. In a plural society where one moral code will not be agreed upon, 'indifference', as Bernstein labels Rorty's toleration, is the least-worst scenario. It is not the opposition to difference – it presupposes it – or to caring – it still allows for caring social relations – but it is the minimal demand of public life. It is defended as a position against those who seek to impose a unitary way of life on others. Are Rorty's most communitarian moments to be understood as a drive towards this kind of unity? Bernstein insists that when Rorty uses the term 'we', he may be guilty of the worst kind of intolerant tactic. 'We' pragmatists, liberals and atheists, as Rorty would say, could exclude a whole range of others:

‘they’ Kantians, communists and theists. Yet that would be to push toleration too far. Toleration does not demand the abandonment of one’s beliefs, nor does it suppose a harmonious system of toleration. Toleration is itself a compromise between one’s deepest beliefs (as a pragmatist, liberal, and atheist for Rorty), and others’ different beliefs that one does not share, but which one accepts as legitimate ways to live a fulfilling life. Bernstein is correct to argue that Rorty’s toleration is both indifferent and based upon strong beliefs – neither of which is contrary to a deep-seated defence of toleration.

Connolly’s position is similar. Toleration is a consequence of pluralism, but pluralism does not entail the ‘abandonment of all standards’ (Connolly, 2005a: 42), on the contrary it demands the agonistic defence of one’s standards against the encroachment of unitarian drives. A pluralist is not a cultural relativist – that would entail saying that the majority culture is always right, a problem for a minority viewpoint such as a political atheology – but a pluralist prizes diversity as a value – as a sign of resistance against those who wish to unite all under one banner, crushing diversity in the process. Hence toleration is defensible as a minimal standard – but this is not Connolly’s preferred position. Connolly instead advocates for agonistic respect – as opposed to the more traditional view of toleration coming from the centre and being bestowed upon minorities. Agonistic respect is the first virtue of the pluralist for Connolly. ‘Agonistic respect is a kissing cousin of liberal tolerance. But liberal tolerance is bestowed upon private minorities by a putative majority occupying the authoritative, public center’ (2005a: 123). The agonistic dimension of this virtue allows Connolly to defend a horizontal and competitive type of respect – as opposed to a vertical and deferential mode of toleration found in liberalism.

As Sune Lægaard (2007) and Christian Rostbøll (2009) noted about the Danish cartoon controversy, there is a tension between traditional toleration in liberalism, based on autonomy, and respect for diversity. Drawing on Stephen Darwall’s distinction between

recognition respect and appraisal respect (1977), Rostbøll argues that the Kantian conception of autonomy is compatible with recognition respect – recognising the other as a person capable of making autonomous decisions – while not necessitating appraisal respect – the positive assessment of someone’s character. This type of respect, in other words, allows us to maintain ‘the permissibility of criticism of religious dogma’ (Rostbøll, 2009: 637) so essential to atheology. Rostbøll’s defence of recognition respect and Connolly’s defence of agonistic respect are in fact compatible with the pluralistic toleration highlighted above.

Respect, as it is qualified by Rostbøll and Connolly, is increasingly looking like something very demanding of individuals. The primary issue here is that respect may demand too much from others, and not enough of oneself. It may demand that others refrain from critique, while taking one’s beliefs for sacred and in need of protection by law. In a pluralist world, however, neither of those demands can be sustained. Against demands for respect, toleration seems a good-enough guarantee, if it can be conceptualised in a manner that avoids the top-down, majority-minority toleration that Connolly is rightfully critical of. One could look at the eighteenth century atheist, the baron d’Holbach, for inspiration here. His early works were derogatory, highly polemical, and often injurious to dominant beliefs. Yet in his late works he puts forward a radical defence of toleration (Israel, 2010). Holbach the staunch atheist argued that persecution of others on the grounds of their religious beliefs was the worst kind of tyranny (2001: 491). Against those who argue that eighteenth-century philosophes were intolerant of religious belief, one of their most radical members extended calls for toleration he had found in Locke to include those still excluded from the English philosopher’s toleration – Catholics and atheists. Unlike Locke whose toleration is only internal to protestant beliefs, Holbach is also externally tolerant of other religious beliefs, and is a better model for toleration (Spinner-Halev, 2005). Holbach still used irony and reasoned argumentation against other beliefs, but simultaneously defended a model of horizontal

toleration. Disrespect can be a tool of toleration – in particular when it comes to challenging majoritarian and unitarian drives that seek to weaken pluralism.

In order to address Connolly's point about the top-down nature of traditional toleration, however, we still need to see what type of virtue toleration is. Galeotti (1993) has distinguished between toleration as a social virtue, and toleration as a political virtue. According to her, only toleration as a political virtue is required, as a means to guarantee equal respect and dignity. This distinction is powerful in that it limits the role of toleration to the political sphere, and has consequences for the social sphere. If toleration is the bare minimum of political virtue – to accept another's difference as legitimate – and also acts as a limit on certain groups' demands for respect – as their difference does not shield them from critique – it also allows for a stronger virtue to surface at the social level. This social virtue is found in the ethos of engagement of Connolly, or Holbach's sociability. While atheology demands a particular version of toleration, which might be more limited than Connolly's agonistic respect suggests, it allows for a more generous engagement with other traditions at the social – or academic – level. In the words of Connolly (1999: 159):

What contributions to a public ethos of engagement might public atheists make in such a situation? Well, a political movement that translates the assigned marks of atheism into cultivation of nontheistic gratitude for the ambiguity of being opens up some possibilities.

Connolly's insistence that all humans have a kind of existential faith (2005a: 25-6) poses a final challenge to a conception of toleration in atheology. Even if re-phrased in terms of existential belief, the precise existential element further breaks the dichotomy between private belief and public reason that Rorty wished to hang on to. Atheology, with its emphasis on a critique of faith and its reformulation in terms of belief, can be impervious to the problem of practice within religion. Jeff Spinner-Halev (2005) points out a similar challenge faced by Hinduism, as a practiced-based rather than faith-based religion. Andrew Sabl (2009:526) has argued that a Humean conception of toleration, taken as a political virtue

based on prudence, justifies the protection of minority practices as a first step towards wider toleration – including toleration of non-religious beliefs. An Enlightenment conception of toleration can be saved if it incorporates the need to tolerate practices from minority religious groups. Going further than Rorty, one can argue that the insensitivity of traditional toleration theories to religious practices of (non-Western) religions is itself a divinised concept. Its roots can be traced back in a Christian (Pauline) separation of practice from belief to facilitate the conversion of Gentiles reluctant to observe Judaic law. A Rortyan project of de-divinisation thus necessitates the re-thinking of toleration of religious practices. In addition to a critique of orthodoxy already seen in atheology, a critique of orthopraxy (the imposition of particular practices) becomes a necessity. An illustration of post-Christian understanding of toleration, through a short excursion into the role of religion and religious practices into education will help illuminate the consequences of this atheological conception of secularism and toleration.

#### **IV The French ban on the veil: a hard case for a political atheology**

It has been a traditional concern of atheists and secularists to delimit the role that religious movements play in the education system. This is certainly true of Richard Dawkins (2006: 286), for whom both fundamentalist and moderate religion are complicit in attacking scientific education of young children. It is also one of the central concerns behind the veil controversy in France – keeping out religious symbols from public institutions, such as state-funded schools (Galeotti, 1993) – and forms part of the programme of the National Atheist Party in the United States. The role of religion in education is pivotal to debates about secularism, as the strict separation of church and state-funded education clashes with students' (or their parents') practices. An atheology with the above-mentioned inclinations towards agonistic secularism and toleration poses three further issues than those traditionally attached to the issue of the French ban on the veil in political theory: the issue of minority

beliefs, discrimination in favour of atheists, and restrictions on freedom of expression as the suppression of critique.

The political theory literature on the French ban on wearing of veils in public schools is wide and detailed. Here, I am only concerned with how a political atheology, as described above against the background of my critiques of Rorty and Connolly, would consider this hard case in novel ways. Atheism, even with its plurality, is still a minority belief. As such, it should have particular affinities with other minority beliefs against drives towards uniformity by majority beliefs. Commentators have noted that the ban says more about cultural prejudices towards ‘Maghrebi-Muslim cultural identity’ (Köker, 1996: 316) and the unitary notion of French national identity than it says about legitimate limits imposed by secularism. Atheists have good reasons to fear that such conceptions of national identity could promote France as a Christian country, or indeed Europe as a Christian landmass, as the then French president Nicolas Sarkozy was not shy of claiming. The ethos of engagement promoted here, whereby differences are put in the larger context of majoritarian drives, poses a first atheological challenge towards banning minority practices. Patrick Weil (2009) has provided one of the best liberal defences of the ban on wearing the veil in public schools. Yet he largely exemplifies this majoritarian drive towards minority practices. Weil argued that the rising threat of violence against young women not wearing the veil in some public schools necessitated new legislation. Weil’s argument is in essence paternalistic, as he conceives of young women and their parents as being unable to resist community pressures towards wearing the veil (justifying new blanket legislation). It is also unitarian, in that it conceives that the only solution to communitarian pressures is a law that essentially drives minorities into conformity with the practices of the majority. If all French young women did not wear the veil, the issue of violence would disappear. Conversion to the majority culture, contra toleration of minority practices, is defended as the only option.



This raises an issue of discrimination against minority practices that is institutionalised by the ban on the veil. A compulsory wearing of the veil for all young women in French schools would also have prevented the issue of violence. Of course, this is inconceivable in the French context. But the issue of discrimination remains, particularly by the law's reference to 'ostentatious' religious signs. These admittedly include veils, kippahs, and large crosses, but exclude small crosses (commonly worn in France) and potentially exclude small signs of adherence to atheistic beliefs – such as a Darwin fish pin – but not ostentatious signs of atheism – such as a spaghetti monster T-shirt. Of course these external signs of adherence to a particular belief have different significations, ranging from the trivial to the meaningful, from the aesthetic to the existential. While an atheist might react light-heartedly to a ban on wearing a particular T-shirt, she should still be wary of discriminative practices, even those in her favour. It is possible to conceive of a ban on something that most atheists hold dear – such as a ban on criticising religion where it is perceived as harmful – because it puts the atheists' beliefs about religion ostentatiously in the open. Any ban on a practice of a minority belief, whether it is wearing a veil or debating the harm done by a religion institution, should be resisted on the grounds that one cannot always privatise one's beliefs to the extent that they become invisible to the majority culture. The current ban on veils in French public schools, in other words, may positively discriminate against atheists, but precisely because it does, one should resist it as an unfair practice that sets an unacceptable precedent.

Hence it is precisely because the ban restricts freedom of expression of belief that it is viewed as dangerous by a political atheology. Agonistic toleration implies that one can base arguments on one's beliefs. Any restriction on expressing one's beliefs is at the very least to be outweighed against the benefits for all those affected, not simply those who fit the majority culture. If the French ban is justified, as Weil does, by an appeal to keeping religious

faith as a private matter, it endangers the ability of atheists to defend their beliefs if those are included under the category of religious beliefs. In particular, it may endanger the ability of atheists critically engage with religious beliefs, and potentially offend their sensibilities as part of their own freedom of expression. A consistent defence of freedom of expression cannot avoid looking beyond expression in terms of speech, and looking at practices as part of a much larger social issue that would deserve more time than I can give it here. Weil's argument that the ban does not affect the public sphere, but merely schools, is unconvincing as a subsequent law further restricted the wearing of full head veils in public. Whilst more limited in its application (it only covers niqabs or burkas, not veils per se), the law effectively prohibits certain signs of religious adherence in the public sphere. The paternalism highlighted above against minors (and their parents) is extended to some adult women. While the ban may be consistent with Connolly's agonistic respect (particularly if critique is perceived as disrespectful of majority practices), it is incompatible with the model of toleration I have put forward. Toleration implies that one needs to accept practices one potentially disagrees with – such as the wearing of veil – because they are meaningful for others who do not share our beliefs. The alternative is demanding respect for a (majority) culture at the cost of tolerating minorities. Enforcing respect for the French model of laïcité ignores both the complex articulation of this model since 1905, and its goal to keep the majoritarian belief from trampling on minority beliefs. Secularism can be conceptualised as an agonistic struggle between different beliefs – not one skewed towards a majoritarian practice – and toleration needs to be defended against the threat of majoritarian demands for respect, particularly when we disagree with another person's beliefs.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, atheism cannot be left to the new atheists, but can learn something from them. A political atheology, one defined by pluralism, a critical scepticism and an ethic of engagement can both keep the critical edge of negative atheism and build a positive side of dialogue and inter-subjective conception of agency. While a monistic atheism is possible, and often advocated for, under universal principles of reason, scientific method and strict secularism, it is by no means the only – or the most developed – atheism of the past decades. Rorty and Connolly, in different ways, have contributed positive atheologies that challenge this conception of atheism. Though they differ in important respects, Rorty's defence of a strict secularism and the virtue of toleration, and Connolly's post-secularism and agonistic respect both point towards an atheology that inscribes itself in a struggle for citizens' souls where other belief-systems have an equal legitimate right to compete. There are important challenges ahead for such a political atheology. It must hang on to pluralism against drives, within atheistic circles, towards unitarianism. It must both strengthen its sense of secularism and toleration, and not lose sight of its own critical edge. It must defend other minorities that face challenges from a dominant (Christian) culture, including widening its critique of this culture to include toleration of religious practices as well as beliefs. Through a particular ethos of engagement, it must find areas of commonality with religious faiths, where alliances are possible and desirable.

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<sup>i</sup> Meillaussoux's thought is more subtle than I allow for here. His speculative realism is not incompatible with the coming of a god – conceived as a non-necessary being (Watkin, 2011: 132-67; Harmann, 2013).

<sup>ii</sup> One could distinguish here between atheism as radical sceptical position from a pure sceptical position better labelled as agnosticism. I share Connolly's view that pure scepticism is not possible, since there are existential elements to all belief-systems. Agnosticism is perhaps even more pure than atheism, but it is not clear that it would speak to political theorists.