

Accessing public conversations: PR in a pluralistic society

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The purpose of this paper is to provide a research summary of thinking on 'post-secularism' and its attendant pluralism. It is to be read in conjunction with the more declarative 'Insight: PR in a Pluralistic society'.

This paper reviews recent social science developments in the area of pluralism in society, and seeks a 'second translation' of this research as it applies to minority groups seeking access to the public conversation, and also to public bodies which have learned – most especially during the Covid crisis – that they need to have these minority groups at the table: the corollary of the well-known saying "if you're not at the table, you're on the menu" is "if you don't have guests, you are dining alone".

The paper reviews 'post-secularism' as a term which originally applied to the reopening of doors for religious views in society, and examines how the change, which can better be referred to by the more neutral term 'pluralism,' extends to other minority groups, both protected minorities, such as age, disability and gender, and to ad hoc, invisible or otherwise unprotected minorities, such as those representing minority sports. This considers the **three spheres** model of religion–state–society which dominated the **sacral** and **secular** eras but becomes increasingly irrelevant in today's world. Whereas in the past minorities had to make their case to an unsympathetic judge in a self-style 'court of reason,' they are now able to freely participate in the '**marketplace of ideas**'.

We then explore how a minority group can position itself to be a welcome expert rather than an unwanted trespasser in the **public conversation**, and how a public or majority body can make itself attractive to interactions with minorities without the risk of diverting its main business to pursue another agenda.



The marketplace of ideas and the court of reason

The three spheres

In 1999, Peter Berger declared that the previous theory he had espoused for much of his career, *Secularization* was definitively falsified.¹ While others, such as Jürgen Habermas,² chose the more nuanced term 'post-secularism', the overall concept has since become well-established, to the point that, by 2014,³ Berger was able to state that this view was now the dominant theory in sociology.

While it is probably fair to say that Berger's second claim is well-founded, there is still a great deal of debate about what 'post-secularism' actually is,⁴ and the term is something of a red rag to those for whom secularism is the cornerstone of the modern political arrangement.

For our purposes, it will be sufficient to give a broad-brush overview of the general trends in scholarship, without having to choose between rival schools.

Although the discussion which follows will focus on the role of religion, because that is the basis of the sacral – secular – post-secular paradigm, we shall prefer to ultimately go beyond that and use the term 'pluralism' which is less likely to trigger advocates of political secularism, and also recognises the reality that all minority groups, not just religious groups, are beneficiaries of the new environment.

This historical review is necessary as a foundation but will be kept short. We shall adopt John D. Caputo's phrasing of sacral – secular – post-secular,⁵ because it is memorable and easily applicable. To be exactly accurate, this is not a historical review, but a historiographical review: it relates to how historians have described the eras, without any warranty on whether this is actually what happened.

The 'sacral' era is frequently referred to as the Constantinian era, though it was actually the later emperor, Theodosius, who made Christianity the official Roman religion in around 381 CE. In this view of history, Constantine introduced Christianity to the Roman Empire, thereby 'baptising the state' with the Edict of Milan.⁶ From this point (goes the popular discourse) state, religion and society were completely fused.

Whether or not the Roman Empire ever had such a sacral relationship with Christianity, the Middle Ages in Europe were certainly sacral in this sense. We can choose a number of possible dates for the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Modern era – the start of the Renaissance, the invention of printing, the discovery of the Americas – but the most significant political event was Martin Luther's Reformation, beginning on 31 October 1517. Luther's Reformation was not originally political, but it became political when states chose to adopt or reject Luther's views.

The 'secular' era is typically described as beginning with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, itself a reiteration of the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. The Peace of Westphalia, in two separate treaties, brought an end to the Eight Years War (1568–1648) and the Thirty Years War (1618–1648). Augsburg and Westphalia established the principle of *Cuius regio, eius religio* – whoever is the ruler of the state gets to choose its religion.⁷ Although this might seem to be no more than a doubling down on the sacral, it effectively established the nation-state as an autonomous body no

1 (Berger et al., 1999)

2 (Habermas, 2008)

3 (Berger, 2014)

4 For example, Dalferth argues that it is the completion of the secularization project in (Dalferth, 2010), whereas Berger's view is that the theory which he had previously espoused was never true. James Beckford (Beckford, 2012) argues that there are six contrasting and contradictory strands within post-secularism, although, strangely, he does not acknowledge Berger's views. These strands are 1) Secularization Deniers and Doubters 2) Building on the Secular 3) Reenchantment of Culture 4) Public Resurgence of Religion 5) Politics, Philosophy and Theology 6) A Plague on All Your Houses.

5 (Caputo, 2019), expanded by Joseph Camilleri (CAMILLERI, 2012). Caputo does not himself explain it in depth.

6 In reality, the Edict of Milan introduced a brief era of pluralism where people were free to worship as they liked. It was his son, Theodosius, who made Christianity the official religion, and this was followed by an extended period of to-ing and fro-ing. Nonetheless, the *belief* that this is what Constantine did is key to understanding subsequent theorists. This interpretation owed a great deal to Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

The relevant section of the Edict of Milan is as follows: "Therefore, your Worship should know that it has pleased us to remove all conditions whatsoever, which were in the rescripts formerly given to you officially, concerning the Christians and now any one of these who wishes to observe Christian religion may do so freely and openly, without molestation. We thought it fit to commend these things most fully to your care that you may know that we have given to those Christians free and unrestricted opportunity of religious worship. When you see that this has been granted to them by us, your Worship will know that we have also conceded to other religions the right of open and free observance of their worship for the sake of the peace of our times, that each one may have the free opportunity to worship as he pleases; this regulation is made so that we may not seem to detract from any dignity or any religion."

Lactantius, *De Mort. Pers.*, ch. 48. opera, ed. O. F. Fritzsche, II, p 288 sq. (Bibl Patr. Ecc. Lat. XI)

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/edict-milan.asp>

7 (Harrington & Smith, 1997)



longer bound to a religion: the state becomes answerable to itself. This was not 'secularisation' in the sense the word is used today, but it created the conditions which enabled it.

In post-Reformation northern Europe, a gradual process of secularisation then took place. The success of this project prompted Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 1904) which remains the cornerstone of secularisation theory. However, the politics more commonly associated with secularism began with the French Revolution in 1789 and the United States Bill of Rights in 1791, although these two were opposite in their effects. In France, the sacral era was brought to an end by the ejection of religion from society and from the state. The US Bill, although later widely viewed as similar in intent, actually ejected the state from society and religion. Nonetheless, it is the French model, particularly of *sécularisme combati*⁸, as Emmanuel Macron has put it, which was perceived by secularisation theorists as the dominant one, with the USA regarded as an exception.

The 'post-secular' era begins not so much with the resurgence of religion⁹ as with the loss of control by the state. Apple Computer has a bigger budget than Denmark. Britain, on extricating itself from the European Union, finds itself bound by the World Trade Organisation. For the 27 remaining EU nations, the European Convention on Human Rights supersedes national law in a way that the Universal Declaration never did.¹⁰ During the Covid crisis, it was the World Health Organisation that led the way. However, these are themselves dwarfed by the power of the Internet. While some nations impose restrictions, and others demand the right to access private information, they are essentially Canute instructing the waves to go back: the Internet forces governments to recognise that they are now guests at the table, no longer the owner of the table.

If the sacral was a complete fusion of state–religion–society, and the secular era was a fusion of state and society with religion excluded, then the post-secular is not where religion re-enters the state, but where the intrinsic link between state and society is broken¹¹. This is not necessarily evident to us because we have lived through it, like the apocryphal story of the frog and the kettle.¹² Fifty years ago, it was widely accepted that one could and should trust the government. Today, the notion is quickly dismissed.

The Court of Reason and the Marketplace of Ideas: how Karen on Facebook came to trump WHO

The three spheres, state, religion, society is a helpful way to understand how the sacral era, where the spheres were fused, came to an end, and it also enables us to understand how the secular era, where the state can no longer claim to be the dominant player in society, is also reaching its end:

Sacral: state=society=religion

Secular: state=society, and religion is excluded

Post-secular: state, society and religion are separate from each other.

However, this description is less helpful for understanding the situation in which we live now. We will therefore take another analogy, based on the notion of the Court of Reason.¹³ In the secular era, the previous 'court of ritual' where ideas of religious dogma determined what was true was replaced by the 'court of reason,' where critical rationality was made normative. However, as Simon Blackburn notes,¹⁴ the 'autonomous court of reason' cannot substantiate itself. When asked the question about where authority originates, as the peasant does to King Arthur in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, secularism had no more compelling answer than sacramentalism.

A competing metaphor has come, somewhat ironically, from the courts themselves: in this case, the US Supreme Court, which has adopted into its First Amendment vocabulary the term 'marketplace of ideas.'¹⁵ In its original

8 See also (Vergote, 1983)

9 Although this was Berger's starting point, and remains key to the debate.

10 At the time of writing, the issue of primacy (Union) is being tested in the relationship between the EU and Poland.

11 The view that post-secularism is a return to the sacral is put forward by the Radical Orthodoxy movement, However, this is not generally accepted. See (O'Grady, 2000) for a review of this.

12 Often given as an illustration at conferences, the claim is made that if you throw a frog into a kettle of boiling water, it will jump out. However, if you raise the temperature by one degree at a time, the frog will be unaware, and can be boiled to death. This story is based on claims made in the 19th century, but modern biologists report that it is entirely untrue: a frog thrown into a kettle of boiling water will die immediately. A frog will jump out of water when it becomes too warm, irrespective of how gradually the warming took place. The story is popular, though, because it does seem to illustrate an aspect of our lived experience: we are not aware of gradual change.

13 The notion of the 'court of reason' is often attributed to Immanuel Kant, but the earliest use of the term I can find is Wilhelm Grävell's (Pangburn, 2013). Simon Blackburn, in an eloquent defence of reason as such, concedes that we can no longer appeal to the 'autonomous court of reason' (BLACKBURN, 2010). However, the term 'court of reason' is used frequently enough when discussing Kantian thought.

14 (BLACKBURN, 2010)

15 The term is generally attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes (1919), although he did not use the exact phrase in his dissent on *Abrams vs United States*. (Blasi, 2004)



usage it was simply a convenient, albeit powerful, symbol for the importance of free speech. It is salient today because it reflects well the pluralistic, post-secular milieu in which we find ourselves.

In a marketplace of ideas, everyone is free to set up their stall and to present their goods in whatever way they see fit. No one is guaranteed an audience. Unlike the 'court of reason,' one cannot make an appointment and address the court in its plenary session. In the marketplace of ideas, a stall selling inferior goods at a higher price may prosper. This may be for obvious reasons – the caller has a louder voice, or more friends, or a bigger, brighter stall – or for no apparent reason at all. Stallholders are generally unrestricted in what they can say about their own produce, but may receive a visit from the market authorities, or a delegation from their fellows, or simply experience a loss of custom if they try to promote their stall by denouncing another stallholder.

The metaphor of the marketplace goes substantially beyond its original usage in US jurisprudence. Implicit in US discourse on free speech was the notion that there were always limits, especially on the right to 'shout fire in a crowded theatre.'¹⁶ However, the experience of the Covid-19 year on social media is that those promoting, for example, anti-vaxx views, are not easily or quickly shut down by the managers of the marketplace, be it Facebook, Twitter, or Mumsnet.

What had probably not occurred to Oliver Wendell Holmes when he coined the term was the notion – which would have been almost unthinkable at that stage of secularisation – that the state itself would just be one of the stallholders. It is one thing for the state to make a treaty recognising supranational authorities, such as the World Health Organisation, or for a federation such as the EU to have its own club rules. It is understandable – though to someone of Emmanuel Macron's combative secularism persuasion, regrettable – to have to engage with religious community leaders to promote vaccination during a crisis. But it is quite another thing to accept that 'Karen on Facebook'¹⁷ wields a similar level of influence. However, within a true marketplace of ideas, not only can anyone set up a stall, but passers-by can also call out comments which can themselves shift the balance of the marketplace.

We can debate whether a pluralistic society *should* give so much space to 'Karen on Facebook' (in the guise of the 'talk-to-the-manager anti-vaxx mum'), but we should also recognise that the moment we introduce the word 'should' we are returning to some version of the 'autonomous court of reason' which stands solely on its own authority. The reality is that the passer-by in the marketplace shouting criticism at the stallholders is as much a part of this marketplace of ideas as the World Health Organisation, Apple Computer and the Holy See. If more people are listening to the collective of Karens, they are, at this time at least, more significant.

The Public Conversation and the 'new rules'

Sociologists sometimes write in such a way that they give the non-specialist reader the impression that particular periods in history came to an end as others began. In reflecting on the sacral era, the secular era, and the post-secular, we need to be aware that the sacral era never really finished, and there is no great likelihood that the secular will entirely finish either. Most of us have learned to navigate the co-existence of some spheres of life where the sacral persisted, such as prayers in the House of Commons, and we will need to navigate the persistence of the secular into the post-secular as well. This is not a problem for the 'marketplace of ideas' metaphor, where sacralism and secularism are welcome to set up their stall, but it means that we can find ourselves in conversations where we may have a pluralistic intent, but our correspondent sees things through an exclusively sacralist or secularist perspective.

Peter Berger, in his final published book (Berger, 2014) moves to some extent away from the term 'desecularisation' toward 'pluralism'. This is a more helpful term, since it does not have the 'red rag to a bull' effect on those, like Macron, who see secularism as the crucial bulwark of European society. Equally, it is a more defining and therefore useful term than 'post-' something, which tells us nothing about it, and is liable to lead us into the same morass as 'post-modernism,' whose meaning and even existence is now so disputed that it is no longer useful.

We should also accept that there is no particular reason why this societal development should be 'beneficial'. One of the characteristics of secularisation theory, and modernism generally, was the teleological view of history¹⁸. If history has a purpose, then 'progress' is good, and therefore the 'secular' must be better than the 'sacral' simply because it came afterwards. Part of the rise of 'post-' terms is because, in general, scholars no longer subscribe to

16 The term also comes from Oliver Wendell Holmes in the same year. "The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theatre and causing a panic", SCHENCK v. UNITED STATES 1919.

17 "Karen on Facebook" has yet to make it into learned journals, but the stereotype is well-understood, albeit variable. See <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/may/13/karen-meme-what-does-it-mean> and <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/karen>.

18 See (Fordahl, 2016).



this teleological view. Post-modernism is simply what comes after modernism, lacking the confidence of its own coherence to give itself a better name, and shying away from modernism's own claim to be the 'final advance.' Critics of 'post-modernism' as a term highlight that it is an oxymoron – 'modern' is what is now, so there can be no 'post-modern' – without recognising that no such term would be needed if modernism had not arrogated to itself the right to call itself by that name.

The court of reason may be designed – albeit poorly designed – to settle disputes as a neutral, rational arbiter. The marketplace of ideas has no such purpose, and it would be unwise to claim that it was 'designed' at all. Accepting that 'Karen on Facebook' may have more collective influence than the World Health Organisation on particular kinds of readers does not mean that we agree that she 'should', or even that we agree with the fairness of the stereotype. To accept pluralism is to accept that the only 'right' one needs to make a case in the marketplace of ideas is being present and having a case one wishes to make.

Minorities and authorities in the marketplace

Secularisation theory begins with the relationship between church and state (or mosque and state, or temple and state), and *secularism* seeks to end, or, at least, dramatically curtail that relationship. Secularisation became a shorthand for 'the inevitable decline of religion' during the 20th century¹⁹, with the corollary that it was acceptable to be religious as long as you kept it to yourself and did not bring it into the public sphere. Moreover, if religion were to survive at all, argued Berger²⁰ (in his earlier phase) and others, it had to learn to compromise: 'extreme', 'fanatical' and 'fundamentalist' forms would be the first to disappear. When Berger declared in 1999²¹ that this theory of which he was previously one of the leading advocates was definitively falsified, he specifically referenced the failure of these predictions.

This view has a knock-on effect on other minorities, including those distanced from religion. Minority sports, minority art-forms, despised forms of 'low' culture, marginalised groups such as sex-workers and even supporters of electorally unsuccessful parties learned during the previous era that they had to 'know their place', and that access would not be granted to public conversations, unless, as the English Collective of Prostitutes has been able to achieve successfully, they used the frisson of their marginalisation to do so.²² Views which were non-mainstream, or not endorsed by the state were things you 'kept to yourself'.

Speaking for a moment from my personal experience while running health consultations on behalf of the NHS, I encountered numerous groups which were initially suspicious of our requests for their views because no one had ever asked for their views before, and their previous attempts to present them had been politely but firmly rebuffed. The Mid-Staffs health crisis (in which I was not directly involved) was attributed, by Robert Francis QC, at least in part to a failure to listen to pressure groups, especially that of Julie Bailey (Cure the NHS)²³. Bailey and her colleagues had been campaigning for an investigation since 2007 but had met with obstruction on the part of the bodies supposedly representing patient interests.

Part of the issue in relation to minority or marginalised groups such as Bailey's campaign was that while the state had determined that it was happy to protect minorities, it still took it upon itself to define what minorities were. The Equality Act (2010)²⁴ was widely welcomed for its protection of historically discriminated-against minorities, but it still stipulated the list of what constituted a minority deserving protection. A public official could retort in a public meeting "you are not a protected minority" when challenged on an aspect of policy perceived by one group to be inherently unfair. Notably, the list differs sharply from the protections set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which also specify protection for *political* beliefs and membership of an association.²⁵

The metaphor of the marketplace of ideas is made reality by the ubiquity of online relationships. Indeed, authorities such as the UK or other governments have discovered that they are powerless to police the internet, and their own voices are drowned out by those of others. Governments, like everyone else, must set out their stall in the marketplace if they are to be heard, and they may find that their 'official' voice is less trusted and followed than

19 (Fordahl, 2016)

20 In *The Sacred Canopy* (1990), et al.

21 (Berger et al., 1999)

22 Selma James describes how she was asked to be spokeswoman for the collective "because they couldn't be public". (James)

23 The Francis Report on the Mid-Staffs health scandal: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20130104234315/http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_113018

24 "The following characteristics are protected characteristics –

age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; sexual orientation."

The Equality Act (2010), <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/part/2/chapter/1>

25 <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>



that of trusted or merely flamboyant politicians: Donald Trump's personal Twitter following in May 2020 was almost 80 million, whereas the official POTUS account reached a maximum of around 33 million before it was reset for Biden's inauguration. Barack Obama, more than five years after stepping down as president, retains 130 million and is the most followed on the platform.

From invaders to experts: three rules for the public conversation

Given that sacralism, secularism and pluralism co-exist, and that, in many cases, the same group of people can be comfortable with choosing between these frameworks as it suits them, how can minority groups – whether religious minorities, other protected minorities, or self-defining minorities – gain access to the public conversation? While the metaphor of the marketplace can help us understand why they should be allowed access, and why they may have a greater say than 'official' bodies, it does not help us to identify *how* an under-heard minority can increase its share of voice, beyond saying 'shout louder and lower your prices.'

We shall therefore consider a third perspective, to add to our discussion of the three spheres (state, society and religion) and the marketplace of ideas. This third perspective is the **public conversation** – which we might conceptualise into something as concrete as what the Americans might call the 'town hall meeting,' though this does not have the same resonance for UK audiences.

In the public conversation, although everyone has the intrinsic right to speak, many voices go unheard because time is short, and the chair of the meeting (or the equivalent in a more abstract sense) has wide powers to choose whom to call. Furthermore, some speakers have become adept at hijacking the conversation for other purposes, and some, without necessarily being aware that they are doing it, occupy a disproportionate amount of time.

Moving from a court of reason to a marketplace of ideas has given minorities of all kinds access to the public space, and some have learned to be effective in promoting their concerns in such an arena. However, when decisions are made which affect them, they have traditionally been denied access: they are seen as not representative of general concerns, pushing their own agendas, diverting attention away from the main discussion. While these things may in a certain sense be true, they are just as true of the groups which traditionally *have* been given access.

The result for minority voices is reflected in the modern proverb: *if you're not at the table, you're on the menu*. Inability to access the public conversation means that decisions will consistently be made to their disadvantage.

Nonetheless, we must spare a thought for the chair of the meeting. If she calls the local Vegan Society to speak, then the Sheep Farmers Association will want to respond. If she calls a pressure group against wind farms, then a representative of the environmentalists will also wish to speak. Although these subjects might be – in principle – well worth debating, if the topic of the meeting is 'road congestion at the corner of Bidford High Street', such debates must be kept to a minimum.

To the chair of the meeting, minority voices are easily perceived as **invaders**: they attend the meeting (in the chair's perception) with a single agenda, they speak as if everyone already agrees with their premise, they assume that their minority interest is everyone else's first concern, they take no account of the views of others, and they act as if alternate views are the 'enemy.' This is a manifestly unfair characterisation, but it has enough truth behind it that everyone who has chaired a meeting recognises it.

This is not only a stereotype which can be applied to religious minorities. It applies to the local train enthusiasts, the people advocating for the right to full-body tattoos in the workplace, those wishing to protect the rights of foxes, and so on.

One of the points of learning for public authorities during the Covid crisis – though wise authorities had previously learned the lesson – is that society is made up of hundreds of thousands of such interest groups. Simply listening to dominant groups, whether demographically a majority, a largest single minority, the most articulate or those who have traditionally had access to the public conversation, means that important information is missed.

A politician seeking to win an election need only count on 51% of those who vote to be completely safe, whereas a public authority needing to achieve 80% or better vaccination rates must go deeper. The tyranny of the majority, as John Stuart Mill put it, becomes its own enemy during a public health crisis.

It is greatly to the advantage of the chair, and the public in general, if minority voices can be moved from **invaders** to **experts**. A group of health specialists can sit around and speculate on whether 'the Asians in Stafford'²⁶ will

²⁶ This was a crunch question in preparing for the West Midlands Cervical Screening Campaign, 2007-2009.



respond well to a particular campaign, but it is better to ask them (and, in the process, discover that 'the Asians in Stafford' is not a single, homogenous group with a shared opinion). When it comes to finding ways to increase vaccination uptake among communities already pressured towards scepticism, community-experts are needed not only to say *how* they might be engaged, but to actually lead the way as community-advocates.

Analysing the issues, we propose three 'rules' which minority groups can apply, and which chairs of meetings can invite them to apply, which help to shift their role from that of invader to that of expert.

1 State Perspective

Someone who begins 'speaking from my perspective as a dog owner' or 'speaking from my perspective as an immigrant' immediately places their comments in a context. They are not insisting that everyone agree with them, or presenting their experience as universal, nor are they representing it as normative. But they are also providing a reason to treat what they have to say as expert opinion in as much as it relates to their perspective.

Because in such circumstances it is always tempting to claim the most prestigious place possible, it is easy to get trapped into saying "speaking on behalf of..." or "I represent..." If no such representation has been agreed, it is likely to be challenged. But, even where this is in place, it positions the speaker again as invader not advisor, imposing the interests of their group, rather than offering its insights.

2 Be relevant, useful and interesting

The most obvious sign of invasion is when the speaker in a public conversation attempts to redirect the topic to their own agenda.²⁷ Dominant-group representatives get away with this to a certain extent, but if a minority speaker wishes to be treated as expert not invader, then they must address the issue in question, and present their expert insights for the benefit of solving the problem, not self-promotion. Of course, the interests of the group are now being represented, but the conversation is not being hijacked.

The corollary of this is that if the chair wishes to continue to benefit from the good will of minority groups, she must eventually make time at a subsequent meeting to discuss their issues of concern.

Part of being relevant, useful and interesting is that minority groups must learn to use ordinary language.²⁸

3 Announce, do not denounce

Many public conversations are held in an adversarial format, whether it be in a select committee of the House of Commons, or a discussion on Facebook. However, playing into the attack/defence role immediately identifies a minority voice as invader. When speaking from their perspective, an expert has expertise only on what they know. It therefore follows that they should not be passing judgements on other perspectives.

As with the other two rules, dominant-group voices have been getting away with denunciation for some time. Indeed, this is part and parcel of the 'court of reason', where those who are bold enough to claim that they speak for 'reason' and 'objectivity' take it upon themselves to judge all others. This is not permissible in a marketplace of ideas, and, as pluralism develops, it is increasingly seen as bullying by the dominant group.

For the chair of the meeting or other public arbiter, minorities denouncing each other comes across as bickering by the invaders. On social media conversations, it will immediately be dismissed as a 'rant,' and the speaker loses both credibility and their audience.

Protected spaces

We have considered the 'three spheres', which relate to the history of how the sacred gave (at least partial) way to secularism, and how secularism is beginning (again, at least partially) to give way to post-secularism. We have characterised post-secularism as what happens when neither state nor established religion *nor anything else* owns or governs society. Post-secularism is not when a new interest group, for example social-media, comes to dominate, but when society recognises its plurality: there are now many people at the table, with a say based on the fact that they have chosen to turn up.

²⁷ For example, at the Annual General Meeting of the West Midlands Liberal Democrats, 2010, the report by the Treasurer was interrupted by questions from the floor on the issue of Kashmir until one member moved 'next business'.

²⁸ A point made by Jürgen Habermas (Habermas, 2008, introduction), and frequently cited by other writers.



This led us to the notion, borrowed from US freedom of speech jurisprudence, of the ‘marketplace of ideas,’ in which everyone is free to set up their stall, but no one is guaranteed an audience. We have noted how bystanders, such as the stereotypical ‘Karen on Facebook’, are able to exert influence even (or especially) when they represent no one but themselves and have no particular agenda to advance.

This in turn led us to the ‘public conversation,’ where minority voices can gain access as experts rather than invaders, provided that they do not engage in ‘invader-like’ behaviour. Our three rules are designed to assist them to avoid the common pitfalls. We should note at this point that ‘Karen on Facebook’ is often successful because ‘she’ (we recognise the fundamental misogyny of the stereotype) navigates these rules well: ‘I’m a mum, and...’ is a way of stating perspective, and a much more social-media acceptable way than saying ‘I am the secretary of the Dawlish branch of Mothers for Excellence, and as such...’ Karen on Facebook does not represent herself as speaking for all mums everywhere, but only her own point of view. She is relevant, (apparently) useful, and interesting. If she were not, people would not share or respond to her posts. And she has learned how to announce without *appearing* to denounce. The often seen ‘I’m not saying that xyz is wrong, I’m just saying you should do your own research’ is a good example of treading that fine line, even though the recommendation, that ordinary Facebook users should conduct massive double-blind trials into vaccines, is impractical.

We should now consider the exceptional space which is the **private space** of the minority group. I mentioned earlier Habermas’s dictum that minority groups – he was thinking particularly of religious minorities – must learn to translate their vocabulary into ordinary language when engaging in the public conversation. But this does not mean that they must do so in their private space. We are otherwise headed into territory, frequently satirised by comedians, where no one can say anything, anywhere, because it might offend someone, somewhere.

This is not to say that in the private space, ‘anything goes.’ Indeed, the previously private spaces of dominant-groups have come under increasing fire in recent years.²⁹

However, in a pluralistic society, there is a recognition that a minority group is not required to repeatedly justify its internal space based on the general rules of the public space.³⁰ The Lamb Farmers Association has no obligation to consider the needs of Vegans as it conducts its meetings, and the Vegan society is not required to give a right of reply to the lamb farmers.

Navigating pluralism

We referenced in the previous section that there is nothing intrinsically beneficial about post-secularism or, indeed, pluralism, simply because it comes *after* secularism. We could term such an expectation the ‘teleological fallacy.’ However, we believe that moving to a more pluralistic society has many potential benefits, alongside pitfalls, some of which are obvious and some yet to emerge. For public authorities, pluralism gives access to conversations with previously invisible minorities on whom they may need, now or in the future, to rely. For minority groups, pluralism offers, although it does not guarantee, a seat at the table. While the benefits are less obvious for traditionally dominant groups, it is perhaps salient to observe that these groups have been losing their dominance for some time. Pluralism means that they do not lose their seat at the table when they are no longer majorities or major players.

We shall now consider for a moment how these groups can and should navigate pluralism.

Public Authorities

Public Authorities were primary beneficiaries of the secular era, where the dominance of established religion over the state gave way to a state which was answerable only to itself. However, public authorities have become increasingly beleaguered in recent years because of the growing distrust in authority generally,³¹ and the rise of conspiracy theory specifically.

²⁹ Such as the UK’s Presidents Club scandal, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-42801178>

³⁰ This was recently illustrated when Blackpool council and Transport Services Ltd were fined for breaching the Human Rights Act when they removed advertisements promoting an event featuring controversial speaker Franklin Graham. According to the BBC, adjudicating judge Evans said in her ruling: “the decision breached the Human Rights Act’s protection of freedom of religion and freedom of expression.

“It gave preference to the rights and opinions of one part of the community without any regard for the rights of the claimant or those who shared its religious beliefs.”

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-lancashire-56609987>

³¹ A PEW Research metastudy published in May 2021 reveals a steadily downward trend in trust in government in the USA, from around 75% in 1958 to around 24% today. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/05/17/public-trust-in-government-1958-2021/>



The Freedom of Information request to Leicester City Council in 2011 inquiring on preparedness for a zombie apocalypse was perhaps always intended as comedy,³² but the anti-vaxx fears³³ arising from Andrew Wakefield's 1998 paper in the *Lancet* spuriously linking autism to the MMR vaccine are believed to have caused many thousands of deaths. The paper was not retracted until 2010.³⁴

During the Covid crisis, health authorities such as in Birmingham, UK³⁵ constructed new ways to engage with multiple faith and ethnic minority community groups and leaders in order to bring vaccinations to areas of the city where uptake was low.³⁶ Recognising pluralism as a strength rather than a threat was core to this strategy, and this approach has been echoed with varying degrees of commitment across Europe.

For public authorities, the greatest difficulty in pluralism is in recognising that the state has already ceded its power. This is not merely 'government by consent,' as John Locke put it, but a formal subscription to international agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and, in Europe, the European Convention on Human Rights. When, as recently as 1997, the Belgian parliament commissioned the *Sektenrapport*,³⁷ which recommended the banning of hundreds of small religious groups, it was challenged in the European parliament by UK MEP David Hallam, who argued that if Belgium were to do so, it should be expelled from the EU, since it would be in breach of Article 9a of the European Convention on Human Rights.³⁸ Six years later, a large proportion of these groups were wrapped up into the *Conseil Administratif du Culte Protestant et Évangélique*, which joined Catholicism, Anglicanism, Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Atheism (*laïcité*) as one of the state's formally recognised religions. However, new religious movements, alongside Hinduism, Buddhism and other world religions still have no recognised role. The wider issue that the fallout from the *Sektenrapport* did not address was the notion that religious or other freedom of thought or conscience movements should be answerable to the state at all.

During the Covid crisis, the Belgian government engaged extensively with the recognised seven 'religions' and agreed protocols for public gatherings which were regularly updated. However, it was unable to engage with unregistered groups, including groups within a recognised religion which had opted not to affiliate with the recognised bodies. This may have contributed to the dramatically lower uptake of vaccination in Brussels, where such groups are concentrated, as compared with the Flemish and Walloon regions.³⁹

Minority groups

Interviews with leaders of minority groups for this paper indicate that while public authorities are increasingly open to active engagement from previously disregarded groups, the actual terms of that engagement are rarely clear. One organisation working as part of a mixed consortium in Africa identified the difficulties in working from its faith-based values as part of a non-faith consortium, not in the sense of conflict of interest, but simply in the area of vocabulary. This is exacerbated by the tendency of others to appropriate specifically religious language and use it in a general sense.

Minority groups have also identified the problem that, while some authorities are willing to engage pluralistically, others are not. At times, it seems to come down to the whim of an individual as to whether a minority group is to be actively welcomed or tacitly excluded. This can create problems as groups relate to different individuals within the public authority.

A key issue for minority groups seeking to benefit from a post-secular, pluralistic environment is that while Peter Berger and others may have confidently declared the end of secularisation, the reality is much more mixed. David Martin's paper (Berger et al., 1999) highlights the role of Pentecostalism in South America as a key progressive movement, and one of the primary elements supporting the book's overall contention. However, in the Belgian *Sektenrapport* released just two years earlier, Pentecostal churches as a group were listed as cults. The 'wild

32 https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/zombie_invasion

33 A YouGov survey from 2020 reveals that anti-vaxx sentiment is common across Europe and the USA, with 38% in France agreeing that 'the truth about the harmful effects of vaccines is being deliberately hidden from the public', 33% in the USA, 31% in Germany and only the UK and Denmark at 19% and 14% being under one person in five for the nations surveyed. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2021/01/18/global-where-believe-conspiracy-theories-true>

34 (Eggertson, 2010)

35 Based on interviews conducted for this project.

36 For a Europe-wide perspective, see *Responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in the fields of non-discrimination, diversity and inclusion* <https://rm.coe.int/cdadi-2021-3rev-good-practices-responses-to-the-covid-19-pandemic-in-t/1680a1b72d>

37 The *Sektenrapport* is not available online, although the Belgian government has published a scanned copy of the contents pages. https://www.dekamer.be/kvvcr/pdf_sections/publications/sectes/sectes.pdf

38 https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/convention_eng.pdf

39 The current dashboard of vaccination uptake is here: <https://covid-vaccinatie.be/en> This data is updated on an ongoing basis. At the time of writing, uptake in Flanders was 80.63%, in Wallonia 70.47%, and in Brussels 57.00%.



growth' of Pentecostal churches in Brussels, many of which are linked with South American immigrant communities, continues to be highlighted in the Belgian press as a 'danger.'

Pluralism creates opportunities for minority groups to engage in the public conversation and in the marketplace of ideas, but this is nowhere near becoming a guarantee. The rules we propose, 'state your perspective', 'be relevant, interesting and useful' and 'announce, do not denounce' should assist minority voices to steer a public conversation (or conversation with public authorities held in private) from 'the court of reason' to 'the marketplace of ideas', and help establish the voice as 'expert' rather than invader, but in contexts where pluralism is not socially or formally accepted, they are unlikely to create a breakthrough.

This is particularly an issue where the state chooses to determine what constitutes a 'legitimate minority' and requires registration: minorities already suspicious of government are likely to resist all forms of registration.⁴⁰

The owners of the marketplace: Facebook, Twitter, and other semi-governed platforms

Internet social media providers have created the platform on which a free-running 'marketplace of ideas' has moved from metaphor to reality. It might be fair to say that the stereotypical 'Karen on Facebook' is something which is an inevitable product of the Facebook algorithm: when content is shared, becomes shared progressively more widely. The 'Karen of Facebook' figure is no more than a summary term for people who have unconsciously gained facility in the 'new rules.'

However, the Covid crisis has put severe pressure on Facebook's ability to manage this, in the same way that the Trump presidency put pressure on Twitter. While Twitter's structure and algorithms appear to have favoured organised groups and their followers, and thus proved highly useful to US alt-right groups, Facebook seems to be more accommodating to people who come across as having no sponsors, no axe to grind, and who are simply handing out their opinions for the sake of them.

During the latter part of 2021 Facebook has come under the same level of criticism for allowing free rein to anti-vaxxers that Twitter faced during 2020 for the lenience it gave to the alt-right. However, because Q-Anon and the alt-right are pursuing an identifiable agenda, are semi-organised, and take a combative stance on many issues, it is relatively easy to identify and censure them. Ordinary Facebook users posting their opinions are harder to spot, especially when the platform is relying on algorithms to do so. Members with legitimate views expressed in measured language increasingly find themselves blocked for a period because the algorithm fails to recognise the difference.

Analysing the spread of fake news and what can be done to combat it is out of the scope of this paper. However, it is clear that platform owners have been forced to move a long way in policing their own spaces, and there is a widespread belief that they have not yet done enough.

⁴⁰ An extended response by Belgian academic Jelle Creemers to the issue of compulsory registration in Belgium is summarised here: <https://www.rd.nl/artikel/935098-flanders-wants-more-control-on-mosque-and-church> in the Reformatorisch Dagblad (Netherlands).



Conclusions

Both in his secularising *The Sacred Canopy* and his desecularising *The Desecularization of the World*, Peter Berger was careful to point out that he was not advocating the changes he described: he was not pro-secularisation in his early views, nor anti-secularisation in his later views.

Academic sociologists have the luxury of observation and, as Berger himself notes, the ability to admit they were wrong.

For practitioners of the art of the public conversation, more commonly known as Public Relations, this luxury is not available. Our organisations, clients and own interests cannot wait. Indeed, if we do wait until sociologists have come to a definite interpretation, conditions have most likely moved on.

This paper, which received support from a Chartered Institute of Public Relations research grant, seeks to give the PR practitioner or general observer an overview of what sociologists are talking about, but also some practical steps forward. While we have tested the 'new rules' in a number of online and face-to-face formats, and also gained from the experience of others through interviews, we cannot claim that they are experimentally verified in a scientific sense. We present them as starting points, in the hope that practitioners can build on them, refine them, or even replace them.

It is our conviction, that minority voices deserve to be heard, and that society as a whole benefits when they are heard. It is our hope that this paper will assist in that undertaking.

With thanks to my study supervisor Emma Leech. All errors are my own.



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