



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Public reason secularism : a defense of liberal democracy

Zhang, T.

Citation

Zhang, T. (2018, October 25). *Public reason secularism : a defense of liberal democracy*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/66323>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/66323>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/66323> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Zhang, T.

Title: Public reason secularism : a defense of liberal democracy

Issue Date: 2018-10-25

Conclusion

Returning to the question that was posed at the outset of the Introduction: How can free and equal citizens, who are deeply divided by conflicting (religious) disagreements, live together peacefully and endorse the same set of political principles in a constitutional democratic regime? This dissertation developed an answer to that question in six chapters.

I would like to present the reasoning that led to that answer by outlining the thirteen crucial steps taken in this dissertation, and offer a final reflection:

1. Religious disagreements pose a huge challenge to the legitimacy and stability of our political society. (Chapter Two)
2. The fact of reasonable pluralism leads us to search for a political solution to this challenge. (Chapter Two)
3. Secularism is such a political solution. (Chapter Two)
4. Secularism and atheism are distinct concepts; secularism does not necessarily entail any substantive view of religion. (Chapter One)
5. Secularism as a political principle includes liberty of conscience and the separation of state and religion; the latter is the most pressing issue, and the focus of this dissertation. (Chapter Two)
6. There are four different interpretations of the separation of state and religion, summarized in Separation-theses S1, S2, S2' and S3. (Chapter Two)
7. Thesis S1 and S2 are both too incoherent to be conclusive interpretations of the separation thesis. (Chapter Two)
8. For it to be legitimate, the separation of state and religion should be established upon *shareable* public reason (thesis S3). (Chapter Three)
9. Public reason secularism's (S3, the consensus approach) biggest rival, the convergence approach (supporting thesis S2'), launches four critiques—the subjectivism critique, the asymmetry critique, the integrity critique, the assurance critique—claiming that the shareability requirement of public reason is neither possible nor desirable. (Chapter Four to Six)
10. The convergence approach's four critiques do not stand up to careful scrutiny. (Chapter Four to Six)
11. Moreover, the convergence approach does not recognize the "*inter homines*" feature of public justification. (Chapter Six)
12. By contrast, the consensus approach helps to reinforce the civic virtues of liberalism. (Chapter Six)

13. Therefore, public reason secularism is the ideal political principle in a democratic political society with religious disagreements. (Chapter Three to Six)

Chapter One undertakes a preliminary issue: the confusion of secularism and atheism. By distinguishing secularism from atheism, it makes it possible to view secularism as a political doctrine. Chapter 2-6 addresses which model of secularism is publicly justifiable. The key debate here is that between the consensus approach and the convergence approach, and it centers on whether public reason should be *shareable* (Chapter 4 to Chapter 6). This debate on public reason's shareability directly determines whether religion could play any role in the public justification of political institutions. In other words, the debate on the shareability requirement dictates whether we should support thesis S3 or thesis S2'.

For those supporting the consensus approach, public reason must be shareable in the sense that citizens are able to explain their arguments to each other and vote on the basis of the political values of public reason when it comes to fundamental political questions. Their theoretical opponent, the convergence approach argues that public reason cannot nor should be shareable. They raise strong objections to the consensus approach. Their claim of the impossibility of shareable public reason, however, derives from a misunderstanding of the fact of reasonable pluralism. They claim that (1) the fact of reasonable pluralism already presupposes the unshareability of reasons (the subjectivism critique); (2) By the same token, they argue that public reason has no content as the fact of reasonable pluralism *also* entails the reasonable pluralism of political conceptions of justice (the asymmetry critique). The integrity critique follows from the convergence approach's objections to the desirability of shareable public reason for the stability of a political society. They indicate that (3) the requirement of shareable public reason, which in effect excludes religious arguments, imposes too heavy a burden which will result in a lack of moral motivation to honor such a requirement. Lastly, (4) the assurance critique holds that the shareability requirement of public reason will not keep citizens from defecting from social cooperation.

Nonetheless, these critiques are all unsuccessful. First, the convergence approach has stretched the fact of reasonable pluralism too far. The fact that it is reasonable for citizens to disagree with each other's comprehensive views is not tantamount to their acknowledgment of others' beliefs as also *justified*. Also, while it is reasonable for citizens to differ on conceptions of justice, this does not lead to public reason lacking any substance.

Admittedly, the convergence approach has its attractions in its aspiration of protecting each individual's integrity and counting everyone's reasons as equally important in the public deliberation. Nevertheless, it is not able to deliver on these promises. This is because the convergence approach wrongly assumes that the task of public justification is generating a convergent decision aggregated from every single individual in the political society, in which the "publicness" is eschewed. Instead, the consensus approach regards public justification as justifiable to all of us together. The consensus approach's identification of the nature of public justification employs the assumption that there are certain public goals that are shareable by all reasonable citizens and that trying to achieve them is the fundamental aspiration of justice.

The convergence approach and the consensus approach provide us with two different visions of justice. The vision of justice of the consensus approach is mainly embodied in a common public life, in which political institutions and social structures realize their public functions and provide public goods. To mention just a few: providing national defense, securing law and order, maintaining basic infrastructures, supplying public education, and so on. The realization of these functions requires well-informed citizens who are able to communicate with each other on common bases. By virtue of the integrity argument which envisions a public life shaped and defined by individual citizens' life projects, the convergence approach has indeed offered a challenge by questioning how much space the consensus approach's vision of justice leaves for individuals, while it has yet supplied its answers to a state's core functions. However, a just state cannot leave such questions to the disaggregated and uncoordinated decision-making of individuals. Justice should "identify the things that people value depend on extensive coordination and cooperation with another, and that one of the tasks of the state is to facilitate this coordination and cooperation."¹ The consensus approach's shareable public reason better corresponds to the practical operation of real politics. It is vitally important that public reason makes it rational for every reasonable citizen to explain and justify their preferred policies to a wider public. And it also facilitates reducing the social divisiveness of basic political institutions.

In this thesis, I argue that the reason that it is possible for all reasonable citizens to be able to share public reason is that reasonable citizens share the most fundamental political values of freedom, equality, and fairness, which constitute equal respect for people; the substantive basis of justice. The foundational commitment to equal respect in turn sets a limit to the fact of reasonable pluralism in the political sphere. Not only is the shareability requirement of public reason viable, it is also highly desirable. In employing

¹ Alan Patten, "Public Good Fairness," unpublished.

shareable public reasons in the public discourse, citizens are able to “develop political conceptions in terms of which they can explain and justify their preferred policies to a wider public so as to put together a majority.”² They are taking a constructive, engaging and critical attitude to the very political society that they live in together, which will over time promote liberal democracy and nourish the general civic culture of the political society.

To be sure, my defense of public reason secularism (thesis S3) does not establish that secularism on the basis of shareable public reason is the *only* justifiable form of secularism or that it will be accepted by all. No dissertation can achieve that, not within the scope of a dissertation at least. Nevertheless, I do hope that public reason secularism at least offers an attractive political vision for all reasonable citizens for now, and even more, for the future.

² John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 1996) 165.