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'[I]t is the will and command of God that […] a permission of the most paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or antichristian consciences and worships, bee granted to all men in all Nations and Countries' said Roger Williams, the seventeenth-century Puritan theologian and author of *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution* (1644), almost fifty years before John Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) and a hundred more before religious neutrality was enshrined in the US Constitution. These were brave and prophetic words in 1644. But today they sound strangely utopian, like the deathbed speech of a diehard liberal clinging to the tattered remains of secularism. Williams' generous permissiveness is rapidly exiting mainstream politics. And if it is surprising to learn that one of secularism's earliest defenders was a Christian theologian who drew justification from 'the will and command of God' to stand up for 'antichristian consciences', it may be equally surprising to learn that some of today's strongest anti-secular voices in British and American public discourse come from haters of religion and self-declared secularists themselves.

The Private Sphere

When we think of 'secularism' in the twenty-first century two basic ideas usually come to mind: the constitutional separation of church and state, and a general scepticism towards religious truth claims and institutions. A lesser-known corollary of church/state insulation is the protection of religious belief within a 'private sphere' divorced from a 'public sphere' of political deliberation, formulated most comprehensively by political theorists Jürgen Habermas (1989) and John Rawls (1993). Secularism demands that politicians and public servants leave their religious commitments at home. This fulfils two functions: it ensures that religion does not contaminate politics, so facilitating the peaceful cohabitation of varying belief systems or 'comprehensive doctrines' (Rawls) within the single community of the nation state; and it protects personal religious (and non-religious) commitments from outside interference or ideological coercion. Only physical actions or 'hate' speech that impinge on others' basic rights fall under the remit of the law.

The concept of a private sphere—what anthropologist Saba Mahmood calls 'that sacrosanct domain of religious belief and individual liberty' (2016: 4)—is thus foundational to the modern secular state. Yet today it is precisely this sphere that is under threat. The reasons are no doubt complex, but underpinning it all is a particularly deterministic understanding of ideas and human behaviour articulated most explicitly by neuroscientist and atheist Sam Harris in his 2005 bestseller *The End of Faith*.

Belief Determinism and the End of (Free) Faith

According to Harris, 'Belief is a lever that, once pulled, determines almost everything else in a person's life' (12). This is why he thinks religious profiling may be a good idea (see below), that the 'war on terror' is fundamentally a 'war of ideas' (152), and that 'Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them' (52-3). Since what people believe determines what they do, the battle against religious violence is fundamentally a matter of doctrine, not guns or bombs (though guns or bombs are handy if the belief is dangerous enough). Rather than struggle with a torrent of violence, it is more effective to challenge the spring of belief before it metastasises into action.

Ironically for someone who claims to stand for secular values, the logical conclusion of this line of thinking—that we

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should monitor and manage what people think in order to control what they do—actually reverses the key premise of secular liberalism adumbrated by Williams' *The Bloudy Tenent* and fleshed out in modern conceptions of the private sphere: that humans should be free to think and believe what they want. Article Nine of the European Convention on Human Rights states that 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion'. James Madison, the so-called 'Father of the Constitution' argued all men have 'equal title to the free exercise of Religion according to the dictates of conscience'. George Washington promoted 'liberty of conscience' as a cornerstone of his 'liberal policy', a policy for which he thought US citizens 'have a right to applaud themselves'.

Superficially, Harris agrees. In a recent podcast he told listeners 'I am always talking about the necessity that freedom of speech and freedom of thought be safeguarded, OK? You should be free to think and say whatever you want to say' (28:20). But the real question here is not what Harris tells us about himself, but what he tells us about us. From this angle his liberal endorsement is reduced to a thin epidermis on the flesh of a steroidal anti-liberal muscle, for two reasons. First, because Harris' entire logic pushes against 'the necessity that freedom of speech and freedom of thought be safeguarded'. If belief really does determine behaviour as a lever triggers a mechanism, then absolute liberty of conscience makes no ethical sense. Second, anyone familiar with Harris' writings will know he does *not* always talk about the necessity that freedom of speech and thought be safeguarded. In fact he often seems to be talking about the opposite, as, for example, when he claims 'the very ideal of religious tolerance—born of the notion that every human being should be free to believe whatever he wants about God—is one of the principal forces driving us toward the abyss' (2005: 15). Incidentally, Harris also disagrees with the secular principle of religious equality captured in Madison's reference to 'equal title', since, for him, not all religions are equally compatible with modernity; Islam is particularly deficient in this respect (in his words, 'not all cultures are at the same stage of moral development', 2005: 143). That Harris' anti-religious foundation Project Reason once marketed itself as promoting 'secular values' (Shadow to Light 2015), and that Harris continues to advocate 'the spread of secularism' (Harris 2014) while effectively, if not explicitly, rejecting two of its most fundamental principles (liberty of conscience and religious equality) does not seem to have struck him as odd, perhaps because the work of rewriting secularism by expurgating its liberal content is just too daunting. Far easier to claim the mantle of this venerable tradition without thinking too hard about the jarring notes splintering out of his paradoxical fusion of tolerance and intolerance.

UK Counterterrorism, 'Extremist Ideology', and the 'Extended Mind'

Harris' flagrant illiberalism could safely be ignored were it not for the fact its governing rationale is slowly infiltrating official policy in the UK and US. Prime Minister David Cameron recently stated that, with regard to ISIS, 'the root cause of the threat we face is the extremist ideology itself', thus carrying forward a gradual ideologisation of UK counterterrorism under way since at least the early 2010s. Cameron's 2011 Prevent strategy, a leading policy document for UK counterterrorism, acknowledges 'the importance of ideology' and the failure of previous versions 'to recognise the way in which terrorist ideology makes use of ideas espoused by extremist organisations'. It will come as no surprise that Cameron has increasingly sought PR advice from Maajid Nawaz's anti-Islamist and pro-reformist think tank, the Quilliam Foundation. This is the same Nawaz who recently wrote a book with Sam Harris called *Islam and the Future of Tolerance* (2015), in which the authors argue for an Islamic reformation grounded in ideological reconfigurations.

Whether or not we agree that the fundamental problem with ISIS is 'the extremist ideology itself' (a conclusion that would have annoyed the later, post-Young-Hegelian Marx), the consequences of sublimating the terrain of geopolitical conflict into the abstract realm of ideas affect us all, and in ways we are only just beginning to imagine. With human lives and minds increasingly enmeshed in the soft informational world of the internet and social media—a virtual 'third sphere' between public and private—thought crime and control become a genuine possibility. As Frankie Boyle recently commented concerning UK Home Secretary Theresa May's 'snooper's charter', which sets out to record every British citizen's browsing activity for up to one year:

I suppose that we need to consider what our internet history is. The legislation seems to view it as a list of actions, but it's not. *It's a document that shows what we're thinking about*. The government wants to know what we've been thinking about, and what could be more sinister than that? (My emphasis)

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Boyle is a comedian not a policy expert, and it may be some time before we see 'Ideological crime [being] prioritised while actual crime is ignored'. But the fact remains that tackling 'the extremist ideology itself' shifts the terms of engagement into strikingly totalitarian territory. A glimpse of the land ahead was provided in October 2012, when 20-year old Azhar Ahmed was fined £300 and ordered to carry out 240 hours of community service for posting a Facebook message that read 'all soldiers should die and go to hell' following the death of six British soldiers from an IED in Lashkar Gah. The judge deemed his message 'beyond the pale of what's tolerable in our society'.

Philosophers Andy Clark and David Chalmers once coined the term 'extended mind' (1998) to describe the way technologies of information production and circulation (paper, pen, books, computers, the internet) blur the boundaries between self and world by extending human consciousness into the external domain. For them, our cognitive dependency on these technologies (e.g. as problem solvers or memory supports) makes it hard to tell where humans end and technology begins; this technology becomes, quite literally, us.

What are the implications for human freedom of an extended subjectivity, grafted onto personhood through the prostheses of email accounts, internet histories, and Facebook, and accessible to state powers? Can liberty of conscience and the invulnerability of the private sphere survive a situation where not only is belief 'not simply in the head' (Clark and Chalmers 1998: 14), but the government can peer into the extended self at the click of button?

Religious Extremism: Now Available Violence-Free

Part of the problem stems from uncertainty about what exactly constitutes 'extremism' as opposed to 'tolerable' or run-of-the-mill ideology. Sir Peter Fahy, the former Chief Constable of Manchester Police and national lead of the Prevent strategy, has warned that currently 'There is a danger of us [i.e. the police] being turned into a thought police' because the lines between 'legal and illegal speech' are so poorly defined. According to him, 'If that definition of extremism and an extremist is not well drawn, then […] the police will be put under pressure for themselves to define where that line is', leaving crucial legal distinctions in the hands of inexperienced 'securocrats'. This is a frightening prospect, as Fahy himself recognises. But his worry actually obfuscates an obvious truth: that even if the lines between extremism and non-extremism were clearly drawn, the police would still be a thought police. It is just that responsibility for legal distinctions would be funneled upwards, away from the arm and fist of the police and towards the brain of government. In both cases freedom of thought comes out limping.

The risky vagueness surrounding definitions of extremism is exacerbated by our weakening of objective criteria, such as physical violence, in the determination of wrong thought. According to Quilliam's briefing document on Prevent, 'The ideology of non-violent Islamists is broadly the same as that of violent Islamists; they disagree only on tactics'. Nawaz has directly praised Cameron for highlighting the problem of 'non-violent extremism', which 'may not pose a physical threat' but is still 'a challenge requiring a robust policy response'. Note that a useful feedback mechanism between ideas and empirical reality is destabilised with these statements: what could previously be taken as a fairly objective indicator of extremism, namely, the causal relation between extremist thought and physical, observable violence, is softened in favour of a blanket concern with 'Islamist' ideology (or as the government's broader CONTEST strategy puts it, 'terrorist narrative'). Again, freedom of thought is undermined, only now we have weakened one of the only criteria for measuring extremism in objective terms. Thoughts can be judged and criminalised purely on the basis of their departure from an established ideological, i.e. privately-held, norm. Who gets to choose this norm is an unopen question.

American Republicanism and Religious Profiling: A G4S Cash Cow?

Secular liberalism arguably troughed in November 2015, when self-declared jihadists invaded the Bataclan, killing 130 people, and tipping American Republicanism into a viciously anti-Islamic nationalism. Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, and Ben Carson all proposed their own version of a religious profiling system that favoured Christian refugees and discriminated against Muslims. Trump said all Muslims should be banned; Cruz said America should favour Christians; Carson thought 'we have to have in place screening mechanisms that allow us to determine who the mad dogs are'. Although their policies differed subtly, they all spun out of a single logic: that refugees' and asylum seekers' beliefs would make them do bad things and that we should hedge our bets by blanket-rejecting unChristian

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consciences. A measure of how low American Republicanism had sunk in its repudiation of secular values is suggested by Dick Cheney's intervention. He told conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt, 'I think this whole notion that somehow we can just say no more Muslims, just ban a whole religion, goes against everything we stand for and believe in. I mean, religious freedom has been a very important part of our history and where we came from.' That Cheney, of all people, had to say this does not bode well for the future of American secularism.

As one might expect, Harris rushed to the Republican defence, stopping short of supporting a blanket ban but still recognising that Cruz had 'a reasonable concern to voice', and that we should not dismiss his Christian favouritism out of hand since 'our ability to […] understand who is coming into the country and what their ideological commitments are is *the most important thing to consider*' (my emphasis). Though Harris rhetorically (and contradictorily) dismisses the Republican candidates as 'completely crazy', it is clear that Trump et al are merely expressing politically what he has always held theoretically: some beliefs kill, and any rationally-minded person would consider it a duty to filter these out from social life.

As an exercise in post-secular, post-liberal thinking, it is worth imagining how the Republican candidates' religious screening would play out in practice. Since Muslim belief, like any belief, cannot be seen, heard, smelled, tasted or touched, how would we detect it? In the good old days, colonialists could simply rely on a questionnaire; religious censuses were fundamental to the imperial project, enabling the administration of vast and religiously-heterogenous territories in India and beyond (King 1999; Sugirtharajah 2003). But today? Would Christian refugees gain entrance on their word? A determined terrorist could lie. Should asylum seekers be subjected to a religious exam? Lie-detectors? Should customs and immigration scrutinise the religious background of refugees for signs of Islamic contamination? Since false conversion is always possible, should border control feed incomers pork and alcohol in order to draw out deceitful 'conversos'? Could brain-scanners be developed to identify 'Islamic' thoughts? (A G4S brain-scanning project could be quite a lucrative prospect for Harris, who did his early PhD work on 'Functional Neuroimaging of Belief, Disbelief, and Uncertainty'.)

These hypotheticals may sound flippant but they are absolutely reasonable deductions if your foundational premise is that 'Belief is a lever that, once pulled, determines almost everything else in a person's life'. On this basis, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that a thought-police might be a very good idea indeed. It is clean. It captures terrorism before it becomes terrorism. The problem—for those who claim to support 'secular' or 'liberal' values—is that it is not secular, and it is not liberal (or at least not in the way imagined by the Founding Fathers for whom 'the dictates of conscience' could roam freely over the landscape of religious doctrine).

Agency, Discursive Power, and the Aporia of Secularity

At the crux of Harris' anti-secularism is a simplistic and reductive conception of human agency. For him, jihadist terrorists do what they do because of their consciously-held and publicly-articulated beliefs—beliefs we know about because these have been communicated to us 'ad nauseum' in propaganda material and pre-detonation cries of 'Allahu Akbar!' Harris simply takes the jihadists at their word. And why not?

Any serious discussion about the nature of human agency must surely, at a bare minimum, deal with Freud's unconscious, theories of self-deception and rationalization, and could even touch on Latourian or 'New Materialist' conceptions of human/technological 'distributed agency' (Latour 1994; Bennett 2010). What we do and why we do it often has very little to do with consciously-articulated beliefs, no matter how vigorously we may wish to defend these in public. I will take this as a given—a comprehensive analysis of human agency is beyond the scope of this essay. I will, however, note two further *political* problems with 'taking the jihadists at their word'.

First, from a certain perspective, taking the jihadists at their word is a tacit recognition of the validity of their worldview and hence a duplication the same ideology Harris, Nawaz, and Cameron are trying to fight; it is what postcolonialists might call a 'reverse colonisation of the mind' whereby the terms and categories of the other come to frame our own. From this perspective there is no 'correct' motive for suicide bombing; only more or less powerful insertions into political discourse—powerful because they legitimise certain kinds of physical action, whether suicide bombing or American intervention in Muslim-majority countries. Harris' claim that 'We are at war with Islam' (2005:

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109) is a major concession to the terrorist worldview, since it replicates a dualist vision of extreme religious eschatology focused on defeating 'the West' and establishing a universal caliphate. Even while fighting 'extremist ideology', he buttresses it through a repetition of its basic categories.

But second, and most importantly for this essay, taking jihadists at their word is problematic because it is fundamentally irreconcilable with the basics of liberal secularism. If our behavioural mechanics are as transparent and deterministic as Harris makes out, if jihadists do what they do because of what they claim to believe, then a political philosophy that respects all types of private belief is at best misguided, at worse, a deliberately-chosen self-delusion. This last position broadly characterises what Nawaz and Harris have taken to calling 'the regressive left', that is to say, a left that has looped the loop by defending liberal values so strongly it has caught up with the most bigoted aspects of conservative Islam (as Harris put it in a recent tweet, 'Travel far enough Leftward, and your ethics magically invert').

What Nawaz and Harris do not make clear, however, is that this ethical Möbius strip is not a regressive idiosyncrasy distinctive to the loony left, but a latent conclusion embedded in secularism itself. Indeed, the above discussion yields a curious thought: that traditional secularism—despite its vaunted roots in enlightened rationalism—relies on a non-rational or non-mechanistic understanding of religious behaviour that in some ways shares more in common with Freud than Descartes. This understanding is contained in the very formulation of public and private spheres; the public/private divide makes no sense unless one accepts the possibility—indeed, utter normality—of a disconnect or dissonance between belief and behaviour. The dualism or aporetic censure surrounding belief and behaviour inscribed in traditional secularism is what enables secularists to punish external (public) action without punishing the internal (private) belief that may or may not have led to the action in the first place, thereby avoiding charges of hypocrisy (e.g. intolerance of intolerance) and remaining broadly 'liberal'. Implicit here is the possibility that beliefs do not determine behaviour. Otherwise freedom of conscience would be indifferentiable from freedom of action and equally inapplicable in civil society.

Islamopho-bias: Radical Secularism and the French Far-Right

The tendency to yoke belief to action, thereby dragging belief into the legal sphere, would be troubling enough on its own except for the existence of a not-so-subtle bias against Islam inflecting discussions that should be neutral. Although Harris speaks about belief influencing behaviour in universal terms, he clearly thinks some beliefs do this better than others. Consider these comments from his recent podcast 'Still sleepwalking toward Armageddon', published following the Paris attacks on November 13, 2015:

Despite all the obvious barbarism in the Old Testament, and the dangerous eschatology of the New, it is relatively easy for Jews and Christians to divorce religion from politics and secular ethics. A single line in Matthew, 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's' largely accounts for why the West isn't still hostage to theocracy. The Qur'an contains a few lines that could be equally potent, for instance, 'There is no compulsion in religion', Chapter two, Surah 256. But these sparks of tolerance are easily snuffed out.

Exactly why Surah 256 is easily 'snuffed out' whereas the line from Matthew singlehandedly accounts for 'why the West isn't still hostage to theocracy' Harris doesn't say. By his account, Islam has a special propensity for governing human action. This propensity only seems to kick in, or avoid being 'snuffed out', when the governed action is morally wrong.

Again, this unexplained 'secular' bias could be ignored if it did not have a very clear parallel in actual politics. Marine Le Pen also singles out Muslims for special treatment as part and parcel of her fight for a reinvigorated *laïcité* (France's distinct brand of secularism). She considers public Muslim prayers anathema to the secular state but has repeatedly turned a blind eye to Catholic public prayers against abortion, gay marriage or 'impious' theatre (L'Humanité 2013). Although a core feature of the Front National's political strategy since the late 2000s has been a gradual exchange of religion (i.e. Catholicity) for *laïcité* as a rallying symbol of cultural identity, the *christianisme* it supposedly left behind has clearly not lost its hold. Sociologist and historian Jean Baubérot argues that Le Pen's *'laïcité falsifiée'* has been so successful and keys so easily into the nationalist identity politics because it is an

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'ideological' secularism bearing no relation to its juridical equivalent and blind to the protective limitations built into secularism itself (e.g. state neutrality). Her secularism in fact boils down to a thinly-veiled Islamophobia founded on a 'millenarian vocabulary' of French decay and a reductionist vision of French society.

Postsecularism and the Catch-22 of Religious Violence

For all its virtues, secularism was never a perfect framework on which to build the modern state. Secularists like Habermas and Rawls have tended to downplay the relevance and social significance of religion in an effort to preserve intact a model of a human life idealistically divided into public and private spheres. This has led to serious blindspots in the secular confrontation with religious agency. As John Kerry recently commented, today 'religious actors and institutions are playing an influential role in every region of the world and on nearly every issue central to U.S. foreign policy'. What is surprising here is not that religion is reentering politics in such a forceful way, but that Kerry had to say this at all. Why did we naively assume religion could be isolated from politics or 'kept in the closet', as Rawls might say?

'Postsecular' scholars like William Connolly (1999) deny the public/private divide altogether, arguing that Habermasian or Rawlsian accounts have simply covered politics with a patina of neutrality while failing to confront the unavoidable overflow of religion, emotion, and affect into political discourse. Connolly argues the public and private spheres are reified entities with no correspondence in practice, since human political life is shot through with pre-conscious affects, feelings, desires, and surges of will which break down any possibility of a hermetically-sealed public space of rational argumentation. Even when we think we are speaking and acting in a religion-free way, we are not; indeed we cannot be, since the history of the secular is inherently bound up with the history of religion. The Foucauldian anthropologist Talal Asad (2003) argues that 'religion' and 'the secular' are in fact mutually constitutive terms retroactively clamped down on vast swathes of fuzzy intellectual history. The classic case is the formulation of human rights, since the very concept of a right is tied up with Judaeo-Christian thought on the irreducible dignity of the human person (thus Thomas Paine justifies 'the divine origin of the rights of man' on the basis that 'every child born into the world must be considered as deriving its existence from God', 1797: 2-3).

The problems inherent in drawing too strict a division between public politics and private religion are brought to light in a particularly vivid way by secular confrontations with religious violence. Take the Paris attacks on 13 November. The ideological catch-22 that followed is a classic symptom of secular models. On one hand, the usual Islamophobes came out, saying Islam has a problem, that 1.6 billion Muslims should apologise for the crimes of a few men, etc. On the other hand, since secular ideals dictate that the public sphere must be kept religiously neutral, there were the usual arguments that actually these crimes have nothing to do with Islam, and that the attacks are an understandable if not legitimate response to American imperialism in Syria and Iraq. On the third hand (this is a problem with many hands) was the theological argument that the attacks are non-Islamic, since Islam is a religion of peace. And on the fourth hand were the attackers themselves who believed themselves to be carrying out the word of God.

Which view is correct? The catch-22 stems from the fact that secularists—including many on the 'liberal' or 'regressive left'—want to protect Islam by saying this had nothing to do with religion, but in that very act of protection end up straightjacketing Islam in the cloak of neutrality and thereby denying the possibility of religiously political agency, terroristic or otherwise. Since the only religion secularism allows is politically neutral, any form of religion that doesn't play game cannot be religion. The only way religious violence can be spoken about without reducing an entire tradition to the actions of a few, and without neutering religion out of political existence, is to take up a theological position on the correct interpretation of Islam. But this means giving up secular neutrality.

Writers like Sam Harris are very good at denying this neutrality, as are other 'New Atheists' and radical (anti-)secularists. I believe this partially explains their success from the mid-2000s onwards. They, along with Le Pen, the American Right, religious revivalists, conservatives, and extremists, are filling a void left by the collapse of traditional secularism in the face of religious violence. Religious violence forces secularists to pay attention, to recognise the limitations of their own political framework. It makes a mockery of secular hopes for state neutrality versus religious claims to truth.

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Future of a Floating Signifier

My intention is not to defend secularism as the apotheosis of modern life. Sam Harris may even be right to challenge the established ethics of religious liberty. But if this challenge is still going to unfold under the banner of secularism, we should be clear about what changes have been assumed into the word. Current debates about secularism reveal it as deeply unstable concept, approaching what Lévi-Strauss called a 'floating signifier'—a term representing 'an undetermined quantity of signification, in itself void of meaning and thus apt to receive any meaning' (1987: 63-4). Its divergent trajectory through conflicting political discourses undermines any notion that secularism's true content can be settled once and for all. Secularism is not a fixed category; it is a raging battlefield of semantic appropriation.

370 years ago Roger Williams foresaw a future in which diverse religious beliefs could co-exist alongside each other without fear of persecution. For a time this model was successful. But this time is drawing to a close. Today religious tolerance is being squeezed from two sides. On one hand, ISIS's barbarically primitive xenophobia makes any notion of religious diversity absurd; on the other, an über-rationalist (anti-)secularism is uprooting the very conditions on which the secular state was built. The more belief and behaviour merge in the minds of policy drafters and radical atheists, the more liberty of conscience becomes ethically untenable. Just as liberty of conscience is floundering, new surveillance technologies and neuroscientific discoveries are making thought-legislation a realistic prospect. Writers like Harris are sketching out the necessary ethics for this to happen; Republican candidates seek the political clout to make it happen. The question is, are we ready?

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About the author:

Marek Sullivan is a PhD student at Oxford University.