



BRILL

Recognition, Equality and Democracy

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Abstract

We respond to three reviews of our *The New Governance of Religious Diversity* (2024), by A. Sophie Lauwers, Pier-Luc Dupont, and Simon Thompson, respectively. Lauwers focuses on our rendering of the notion of recognition. From a critical religion perspective she asks us to consider how misrecognition is often intertwined with recognition. Dupont focuses on the issue of education, particularly faith schools, and from a liberal human rights perspective points to potential limitations for equality in our approach, as he sees them. Thompson is already ‘on board’ with our project, but going beyond it he offers a creative attempt to develop some of that project using analogies drawn from the political science of democratization. We respond to each of them in turn.

Keywords

recognition – misrecognition – equality – democratisation

We are extremely grateful to the three reviewers of our book gathered here, A. Sophie Lauwers, Pier-Luc Dupont, and Simon Thompson, for their thoughtful engagement with the theoretical framework we seek to develop and elaborate, the normative principles that underpin and drive it, and some of the important themes we are interested in too. Each does so in their own, quite dif-

ferent ways, with those of Lauwers and Dupont bringing alternative normative-theoretical positions to bear on some of the key features of our approach, and from these positions raising important critical questions, and Thompson, who shares much of our approach and so goes beyond our book in a creative use of some of the themes he finds in it. And so we take them in that order.

Lauwers focuses on our rendering of the notion of recognition. Coming from a critical theory perspective, and critical religion as a more specific subset, Lauwers draws attention to how misrecognition is often intertwined with recognition, and how

recognition policies often reproduce social inequalities and undermine the agency of minority groups.

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(Indeed, Lauwers herself draws explicit contrast between her approach and ours coming from normative political theory.) As such, she argues that there is

a profound ambivalence about state recognition of religion ... [an] ambivalence [that] exists because recognition cannot be reduced to a positive valuing of difference: it often (also) entails control or domination, and it can even impede the very positive valuing of difference it seems to enable.

From here, she points to four risks of our approach: that the notion of religion will be defined by the state and rely on hegemonic discourse; that recognition of minorities will be modelled on that of the majority and this will cause problems for recognising minorities on their own terms; that it can insufficiently address intra-group domination, especially of women and 'minorities within minorities' (as she notes, a long-standing critique of multiculturalism in general); and that it does not do enough to disrupt existing power hierarchies.

Lauwers, then, highlights some interesting and important tensions in how recognition is conceived in our account, and we recognise to an extent the importance of these tensions. Our normative position, however, is that context should become dialogical in which a democratic citizenry (not a separate, mere 'state') respond to claims and struggles for recognition by appropriately and over time modifying the national citizenship. In this politics, no existing identities will remain unchanged and so while we must resist top-down identity impositions, minority identities won't be preserved in aspic and we insist on minorities being co-agents of change. Moreover, by 'governance' we mean

forms of state in which the governed participate in governance, so the state should not be abstracted away and made independent of democratic, dialogical and participatory contextual governance. The notion of religion along with institutional and structural modes of recognition are themselves part of what is at stake in these dialogues, and if such dialogue is carried out oriented by multiculturalism as we understand it, then weight is given to the voices and perspectives of minorities, especially on issues that perhaps most affect them, as we outline on pp. 139–140 of our book. We are certainly cognisant of the power differentials that are inevitably present, but our two normative principles do not rule out adaptations, syntheses, compromise, learning etc. in multiple directions. And this is the case also with intra-group domination. In the book we address this with the notion of ‘democratic constellation’; that the state in entering into dialogue or in partnering with religious groups, for instance, should not seek out singular representatives, but should engage with a variety of different groups. The democratic constellation is, therefore, one that would seek a range of what we might call ‘umbrella’ groups, it would want to engage with Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and so on, but also a range of groups that recognise the diversity under these umbrella terms. What we do, then, is to clearly suggest what the guiding principles should be and how any existing arrangements or changes should be evaluated in the key respects that concern us (and see Sealy, 2025 for an alternative developed account relevant here).

Dupont also approaches the questions and issues we are interested in from a different perspective from our own informed by principles of multiculturalism. Dupont focuses most of his attention on the issue of education, and particularly on the often thorny issue of faith schools, and does so in relation to the notion of equality. Here, Dupont emphasises, from a liberal human rights perspective, the potential issues of equality in our approach. This difference in approach is perhaps captured when he comments,

Modood and Sealy’s endorsement of state-funded faith schools in their current form (designed to educate children of and in a single faith) is difficult to square with their egalitarian commitments.

This, however, does not capture the substance of our egalitarian commitments, which emphasise equity and group-based recognition and equality, not just formal equality of individuals.

One fear Dupont has is that if more Muslim faith schools were to be created, this would exacerbate levels of Islamophobia and segregation. As far as we are aware, there is no contemporary evidence that establishing more Mus-

lim faith schools will necessarily in the long run exacerbate more Islamophobia rather than normalise the place of Muslims and Islam in British life and education, and none is put forward in Dupont's piece. Moreover, in relation to the two minorities that have the most state-funded schools for the longest period, namely Catholics and Jews, each of which insist such provisions are important for giving them a secure place in Britain, it seems to have worked without having contributed to, let alone increased, anti-Catholic prejudice or antisemitism, and faith school provision seems to have nothing to do with when such prejudice does occur. The worry about segregation, however, is a legitimate one, and is not confined to organisations such as Humanists UK and the National Secular Society that Dupont cites frequently cite and which partly underpins their long-running campaigns against faith schools. We agree that the issue of segregation should be taken into account in designing policies around faith-schools, and already existing schemes such as visiting other schools, encouraging contact and mixing, along with curriculum design and other policies are all important for ensuring that we do not end up with segregated communities. But we see these arguments of segregation as important places to ensure that measures to address the risk are in place, rather than that they are used to deny the claims for state-funded faith schools or to abolish them. All schools should propose a culture of questioning and respect for difference. but this can be done in combination with grounding pupils in a religious tradition. A faith school should show how it meets the basic goals of education such as respect for others and development of critical thinking as part of meeting the criteria for state support, including showing how their faith tradition does these things, and including any distinctive or nuanced or dialogical contribution to these foundational educational goals. On further points that Dupont raises, our position is already compatible: multicultural secularism may indeed in some circumstances require 'thinning' rather than 'thickening', such as removing negative views of groups defined by race, religion and so on that might be present, but we maintain that having state-funded faith schools alongside non-faith state schools is making the educational system more respectful of multiculturalism not less. At a higher level than the local, faith schools are an important aspect of multicultural institutional recognition, and in this they do respond to the demands of Muslim groups rather than neglect them as Dupont suggests (p. 2): there is no sense in which every Muslim faith school (or any other type) must be the same as all the others; as Catholic and Protestant schools reflect divergences between Christian denominations, so 'conflicting demands' as Dupont puts it (p. 6) would mean variance between Muslim faith schools. Moreover, evidence suggests that on the whole faith schools take these responsibilities seriously, and certainly perform them no worse than any other school type and

so there is no real ‘faith school problem’ here (see also Sealy, 2025: 71–72; Sealy and Modood, 2025).

Thompson, our final reviewer, comes from a very different perspective from Lauwers and Dupont, and produces a very different kind of response. Indeed, as we acknowledge in the book, we draw upon Thompson’s collaboration with Modood in several places, and as Thompson himself says, he is already ‘on board’ with our project. His piece is thus less a review and more a creative attempt to develop some of our major themes and processes in a parallel analysis with the political science of democratization on the basis that they may be analogous and that this may help extend our own account of religious regime change and dynamics. We welcome such thought-provoking projects and potential uses of our typology of modes, with our distinction of *DONS* and *QONS*, and the normative project of the book. Thompson’s analysis, however, has three misinterpretations of key components of our book, its arguments, framework and principles, which undermine the attempted parallelisation.

The first is that he misunderstands the basic definition of what we take political secularism to be. Thompson comments:

My suggestion is that Modood’s and Sealy’s understanding of political secularism only makes sense given the assumption that secularisation has taken place (and may still be occurring).

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The minimal definition of political secularism we use in the book, however, is one in which

the idea of political autonomy, namely that politics or the state has a *raison d’être* of its own and should not be subordinated to religious authority, religious purposes or religious reasons.

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This minimal definition doesn’t depend on secularisation. As a matter of fact, European political secularism considerably predates secularisation. Historians conventionally date the former to the Peace of Augsburg, 1555 and the Treaty of Westphalia, 1648 which formally laid to rest the Christendom doctrine of the ‘two swords’, Church and State, by placing the former under the power of the latter. Far from a time of secularisation it was a time of intense and violent religiosity. Secularism was a response to the excesses of religion not to its decreasing social significance. In any case, most countries of the world are secular states but many have not had European style social secularisation. We,

indeed, look at a range of countries, following an approach oriented by ‘multiple secularisms’, including those where secularisation is not at all pronounced but which we consider to be politically secular. This includes countries that we include under our mode of pluralistic nationalism, such as Indonesia and India, and which are central to our normative development of multicultural secularism.

The second is a misunderstanding of the basis of how we developed the typology and of the typology itself that we present and elaborate in the first part of the book. Thompson says,

I would tentatively suggest that, just as some democratisation theorists draw a distinction between electoral, liberal and advanced democracy, so Modood and Sealy identify minimal, moderate and multicultural secularism as three versions of state-religion regimes, each one of which is normatively superior to that which precedes it.

pp. 5–6

However, this has to an extent ejected the contextualist grounding of our typology, and of our normative project. Moreover, these are not in fact the distinctions and modes we make in our typology. Thompson seems here to confuse our minimal definition of secularism with Laborde’s minimal secularism (which we do discuss). We don’t in fact identify a mode in our typology called this. Our modes are: majoritarian nationalism, secularist statism, liberal neutralism, moderate secularism, pluralistic nationalism (see table on p. 39 of our book). Importantly, Thompson’s three named versions misses entirely pluralistic nationalism, which is central to how we develop multicultural secularism as a normative mode of its own. Multicultural secularism, also, is not part of our typology (we do not identify any particular countries as meeting this) but a normative construct against which to critically engage and evaluate existing theoretical modes and empirical realities.

The third misunderstanding in Thompson’s account is one of trajectories. Thompson says that a

shift from either moderate or multicultural secularism to, say, secularist statism or majoritarian nationalism may be thought of as a process of secular erosion.

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While such a shift may be a sign of secular erosion, conceptually this is not necessary at all and it may instead be a shift towards a kind of secularism on

steroids rather than erosion of secularism. This is where our minimal definition (as above) is important. France, as a country we would classify as secularist statist is secular, and were, for instance, Britain to move closer to the French model, we would interpret this as a more muscular, exclusionary form of secularism and while it would be an erosion of moderate secularism it would not be an erosion of secularism *per se*. Likewise, a shift to majoritarian nationalism could be an instance of secular erosion if, for example, a country were to move more in the direction of a theocracy, where political authority was subordinate to or indistinguishable from religious authority. But it might not occur like this at all and could go in a secular but ethno-nationalist direction in which secularism remained but the inclusion of minorities significantly deteriorated.

Overall then, we find that our categories do not parallel those of democratisation theory and while Thompson points to some interesting actual and possible social and political dynamics, sometimes drawing on our work and sometimes on other work, we do not at this stage see his imaginative remarks as making us think about building a general theory of religious transition, consolidation and erosion.

We are grateful to Sophie Lauwers and Pier Dupont for their critical engagement, which gives us a glimpse of what our book looks to a critical secularism and a liberal human rights perspective respectively, and thank Simon Thompson for his suggestions on how we could think beyond our book and consider whether democratisation theory offers us conceptual tools to see our modes of governance in a more teleological way than we choose to.

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