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P R I Z E

“Religion in the public sphere”

by

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Religion in the public sphere

Facing the present situation let me first express my ambivalent feelings - a mixture of embarrassment and pleasure. On the one hand, it is impossible to present a lecture that could match the extraordinary rank and distinction of the Holberg price and to meet corresponding expectations. On the other hand, I am just glad to be once again back to Norway and find myself in a rather familiar academic environment, in the midst of distinguished colleagues and close friends, and vis á vis an attentive and sophisticated audience. The unpretentious and inviting cultural environment I always meet in your country encourages me to cope with this unique occasion in an inconspicuous way by continuing business as usual. I will talk about a provocative issue that bothers many of us.

I

We can hardly fail to notice the fact that religious traditions and communities of faith have gained a new, hitherto unexpected political importance.¹ The fact is at least unexpected for those of us who followed the conventional wisdom of mainstream social science and assumed that modernization inevitably goes hand in hand with secularization in the sense of a diminishing influence of religious beliefs and practices on politics and society at large. At least European countries, with the notorious exemptions of Poland and Ireland, did provide sufficient evidence for a continuous recession in the numbers of faithful citizens, whether we look at more institutionalized or more spiritual forms of religiosity. Some indicators though support the qualifying proposition that religious communities did better in cases of orthodox strategies of rejecting modernity than in cases of liberal strategies of adaptation. At the international stage orthodox and fundamentalist movements are anyway on the rise.² Apart from Hindu nationalism, Islam and Christianity are at present the two most vital religious sources.

The Islamic revival has an impressive geographical extension from North-Africa via the Middle East to Southeast Asia, where Indonesia is the most populous of all Muslim countries. The influence of Islam is also spreading in sub-Saharan Africa, where it competes with Christian movements. In the wake of immigration, it is also increasing in

¹ Peter L. Berger (ed.): The Desecularization of the World, (Washington, 1999).

² Zum folgenden P.L. Berger, The Desecularization of the World, Washington 2005, 1-18

Europe and somewhat less so in North America. If we look at countries like Turkey and Egypt we moreover realize that this revival reaches far into the educated milieus of elite cultures and middle classes. In most of these countries the rise of religion cannot but having an impact on domestic politics. In many cases it is not easy to distinguish between the authentic core and the instrumentalization of religion for political purposes. Fundamentalist movements often lock into national and ethnical conflicts, and today also form the seedbed for the decentralized networks of a form of terrorism that operates globally and is directed against the *perceived* insults inflicted by a superior Western civilization.

However, the attack on the twin towers and the rash reaction to 9/11 should not distract our attention from the fact that the Evangelical upsurge is no less important in scope and intensity than its counterpart in the Muslim world. Per Berger characterizes the hard core as “Pentecostalism, which combines biblical orthodoxy and a rigorous morality with an ecstatic form of worship and an emphasis on spiritual healing”.³ Such born-gain Christians share the opposition to cultural modernity and political liberalism, but they comply more easily with motivational requirements for economic modernization. Evangelical movements often result from missionary achievements in countries for which this type of religion is new. There are now about fifty million Protestant converts in Latin America. Evangelical movements keep spreading also in China, South Korea, the Philippines and even in parts of Eastern Europe.

Both of these religious revivals find an echo in domestic politics. They are squeezing their way also into the international arena in various ways. World religions that to this very day shape the physiognomy of all major civilizations fuel the agenda of *multiple modernities* with requisite cultural self-esteem. But the zeal of religious movements more often poisons intercultural encounters. On the Western side of the fence, the perception of international relations has changed in light of a feared “clash of civilizations”. Even Western intellectuals, to date self-critical in this regard, are starting to go on the offence in their response to the image of Occidentalism that the others have of the West.⁴

³ Berger (2005),8

⁴ I. Buruma & A. Margalit: Occidentalism. The West in the Eyes of its Enemies, (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2004)

What is most surprising in this context is the political revitalization of religion at the heart of Western society. Though there is statistical evidence for a wave of secularization in almost all European countries since the end of World War II, in the United States all data show that the comparatively large proportion of the population made up of devout and religiously active citizens has remained the same over the last six decades.⁵ Here, a carefully planned coalition between the Evangelical and born-again Christians on one side, the American Catholics on the other side siphons off a *political* surplus value from the *religious* renewal at the heart of Western civilization.⁶ And it tends to intensify, at the *cultural* level, the *political* division of the West that was prompted by the Iraq War.⁷ With the abolition of the death penalty, with liberal regulations on abortion, with setting homosexual partnerships on a par with heterosexual marriages, with an unconditional rejection of torture, and generally with the privileging of individual rights versus collective goods, e.g., national security, the European states seem now to be moving forward alone down the path they had trodden side by side with the United States.

Against the background of the rise of religion across the globe, the division of the West is now perceived as if Europe were isolating itself from the rest of the world. Seen in terms of world history, Max Weber's Occidental Rationalism appears to be the actual deviation. The Occident's own image of modernity seems, as in a psychological experiment, to undergo a switchover: what has been the supposedly "normal" model for the future of all other cultures suddenly changes into a special-case scenario. Even if this suggestive Gestalt-switch does not quite bear up to sociological scrutiny, and if the contrasting evidence of what appears as a sweeping desecularization can be brought into line with more conventional explanations,⁸ there is no doubting the evidence itself and above all the symptomatic fact of divisive political moods crystallizing around it. Irrespective of how one evaluates the facts, there is now a Kulturkampf raging in the United States which forms the background for an academic debate on the role of religion in the political public sphere.

In what follows I will continue this debate. Let me first remind you of the liberal premises of the constitutional state and of the consequences John Rawls draws for what is called an

⁵ P. Norris & R. Inglehart: Sacred and Secular, Religion and Politics Worldwide, (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2004), Ch.4.

⁶ G. Wills, Fringe Government, The New York Review of Books, October 6, 2005, 46-50

⁷ J. Habermas, Der gespaltene Westen, (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 2004).

⁸ Norris and Inglehart (2004) Ch. 10: Conclusions

“ethics of citizenship”. The battle over what a secular state must expect from its citizens and politicians is a controversy carried out on the ground of normative Political Theory. Through a discussion of revisionist proposals that touch on the foundations of the liberal self-understanding of Western democracies I will then introduce my conception of what religious and secular citizens should mutually expect from one another. These demanding civic duties presuppose, on the other hand, epistemic attitudes and mentalities that secular and religious citizens must acquire in the first place. Since ‘Ought’ implies ‘Can’, we must shift our attention from normative to epistemological arguments and highlight those learning processes without which a liberal political order cannot expect the required kind of mutual respect and cooperation from citizens of different faith and background. I will characterize the change in the form of religious consciousness that can be understood as a response to the challenges of modernity, whereas the secular awareness of living in a post-secular society gains a sophisticated articulation in a post-metaphysical mindset. However, the liberal state cannot influence, by its own means of law and politics, those learning processes by which alone religious and secular citizens can achieve those self-reflective attitudes on which the democratic ethos hinges. Even worse, it is not clear whether we may speak at all of ‘learning processes’ in this context.

II

Let me begin by explaining the liberal conception of democratic citizenship. The self-understanding of the constitutional state has developed from a contractualist tradition that relies solely on public arguments to which all persons are supposed to have equal access. The assumption of a common human reason is the epistemic base for the justification of a secular state which no longer depends on religious legitimation. And this allows in turn for a separation of state and church at the institutional level. The historical backdrop against which this liberal conception emerged were, of course, the religious wars and confessional disputes in early Modern times.

The introduction of the freedom of religion was the appropriate political answer to the challenges of religious pluralism. However, the secular character of the state is a necessary, not yet a sufficient condition for guaranteeing equal religious freedom for everybody. It is not enough to rely on the mere benevolence of a secularized authority. The conflicting parties themselves must reach agreement on the precarious delimitations

between a positive freedom to practice one's own religion and the negative freedom to remain spared of the religious practices of the others. If the principle of tolerance is to be above any suspicion of repression, then compelling reasons must be found for the definition of what can just about be tolerated and what cannot, reasons that all sides can equally accept. Fair arrangements can only be found if the parties involved learn to take also the perspective of the other. And the very procedure that fits this purpose best is the deliberative mode of democratic will formation. In the secular state, government has to be placed on a non-religious footing anyway. And the democratic procedure is able to generate such a secular legitimation by virtue of two components – first the equal political participation of all citizens, which guarantees that the addressees of the laws can also understand themselves as the authors of these laws; - and second the epistemic dimension of a deliberation that grounds the presumption of rationally acceptable outcomes.⁹

It is precisely the conditions for the successful participation in this democratic practice that define the ethics of citizenship: for all their ongoing dissent on questions of world views and religious doctrines, citizens are meant to respect one another as free and equal members of their political community. And on the basis of such civic solidarity, when it comes to contentious political issues citizens owe one another good reasons for their political statements. Rawls speaks in this context of the 'duty of civility' and 'the public use of reason'. In a secular state only those political decisions are taken to be legitimate as can be justified, in light of generally accessible reasons, vis-à-vis religious and non-religious citizens, and citizens of different religious confessions *alike*. This constraint explains the controversial reservation, the so called "proviso" for the public use of non-public, that is religious reasons.

The principle of separation of state and church obliges politicians and officials within political institutions to formulate *and justify* laws, court rulings, decrees and measures only in a language which is equally accessible to all citizens. But what about the duties of citizens in the political public sphere? Rawls' position is this: "The first is that reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or non-religious, may be introduced in public political

⁹ see John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," in: The University of Chicago Law Review, vol. 64, Summer 1997, no. 3, pp. 765-807, here p. 769: "Ideally citizens are to think of themselves as if they were legislators and ask themselves what statutes, supported by what reasons satisfying the principle of reciprocity, they would think it most reasonable to enact."

discussion at any time, *provided that in due course proper political reasons – and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines – are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are said to support.*¹⁰ In the recent debate about citizens' public use of reason, this very proviso of secular justification is countered by a lot of objections.

The most serious one is that many religious citizens do not have good reasons to undertake an artificial division between secular and religious within their own minds, since they couldn't do so without destabilizing their mode of existence as pious persons. The objection appeals to the integral role that religion plays in the life of a person of faith, in other words to religion's "seat" in everyday life. A devout person pursues her daily rounds *by drawing* on her belief. True belief is not only a doctrine, believed content, but a source of energy that the faithful person taps performatively. Faith nurtures an *entire* life.¹¹ This totalizing trait of a mode of believing that infuses the very pores of daily life runs counter to any flimsy switchover of religiously rooted political convictions onto *a different* cognitive basis. Thus Nicolas Wolterstorff maintains: "It belongs to the religious convictions of a good many religious people in our society that *they ought to base* their decisions concerning fundamental issues of justice *on* their religious convictions. They do not view it as an option whether or not to do it"¹². They are not only unwilling but incapable of discerning "any 'pull' from any secular reasons."¹³

If we accept this rather compelling objection, then the liberal state, which expressly protects such forms of living cannot at the same time expect of all citizens that they justify their political statements also independent of their religious convictions or world views. We cannot derive from the secular character of the state an obligation for all citizens to supplement their public religious contributions by equivalents in a generally accessible language. The liberal state must not transform the requisite *institutional* separation of religion and politics into an undue *mental and psychological* burden for *all* those citizens who follow a faith. It must well expect of them to recognize the principle that any binding legislative, juridical or administrative decision must remain impartial with regard to

¹⁰ Rawls (1997), p. 783f. (my italics). This amounts to a revision of the more narrowly formulated principle in John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (Columbia UP), New York 1994, p. 224f.

¹¹ On the Augustine distinction of *fides quae creditur* and *fides qua creditur* see R. Bultmann, *Theologische Enzyklopädie*, (Tübingen, 1984), Annex 3: *Wahrheit und Gewissheit*, p. 183ff.

¹² Wolterstorff in: Audi & Wolterstorff, (1997), p. 105

¹³ P. Weithmann, *Religion an the Obligations of Citizenship*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge UK, 2002, p. 157

competing world views, but it must not expect them to split their identity in public and private components as long as they participate in public debates and contribute to the formation of public opinions.

In consideration of Wolterstorff's objection we should loosen the rigid liberal position somewhat. Certainly, every citizen must know that only secular reasons count beyond the institutional threshold that divides the informal public sphere from parliaments, courts, and administrations. But this recognition need not deter religious citizens from publicly expressing and justifying their convictions by resorting to religious language. Under certain circumstances secular citizens or citizens of a different faith may be able to learn something from these contributions and discern in the normative truth content of a religious expression intuitions of their own that have possibly been repressed or obscured. The force of religious traditions to articulate moral intuitions with regard to social forms of a dignified human life makes religious presentations on relevant political issues a serious candidate for possible truth contents that can then be translated from the vocabulary of a specific religious community into a generally accessible language. The liberal state has an interest of its own in unleashing religious voices in the political public sphere, for it cannot know whether secular society would not otherwise cut itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity.

And in view of the fact that civic self-legislation is a *shared* practice, the requirement of translation is even a cooperative task in which non-religious citizens must likewise participate, if their religious fellow citizens are not to be encumbered with an asymmetrical burden. Whereas citizens of faith may make public contributions in their own religious language only subject to the proviso that these get translated, the secular citizens must open their minds to the possible truth content of those presentations and even enter into dialogues from which religious reasons then might emerge in the transformed guise of generally accessible arguments.¹⁴

This relaxation of too strict a definition of neutrality towards competing world views must not level, however, the institutional threshold between the "wild life" of the political public sphere and the formal proceedings *within* political bodies. We better use the image of a

¹⁴ Jürgen Habermas, "Glauben und Wissen," in: my *Zeitdiagnosen*, (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 2003), pp. 249-263, here pp. 256ff.

filter that allows only secular contributions from the Babel of voices to pass through. In parliament, for example, the standing rules of procedure must empower the president of the house to have religious statements or justifications expunged from the minutes. The truth content of religious contributions can enter into the *institutionalized* practice of deliberation and decision-making only if the necessary translation already occurs in the pre-parliamentarian domain, i.e., in the political public sphere itself.

Revisionist critics like Wolterstorff drop even this important limitation. He pleads for allowing political legislatures to make use of religious arguments.¹⁵ If one thus opens the parliaments to religious strife, governmental authority can evidently become the agent of a religious majority that asserts its will while violating the democratic procedure. Remember, the content of political decisions that can be enforced by the state *must be formulated* in a language that is equally accessible to all citizens and it *must be possible to justify them* in this language. Therefore, majority rule turns into repression if the majority, in the course of democratic opinion and will formation, refuses to offer those publicly accessible justifications which the losing minority, be it secular or of a different faith, must be able to follow and to value by its own standards.

III

There remains still another objection, that deserves closer inspection. The liberal ethics of citizenship, even in a loosened version, appears to impose an *asymmetrical burden* on the religious part of the population. The translation requirement for religious reasons and the subsequent institutional precedence of secular reasons demand of the religious citizens an effort to learn and adapt that secular citizens are spared having to make. The deeper reason for the ongoing flickering resentment of the state's neutrality toward competing world views stems from the fact that the civic duties of civility and a public use of reason can only be discharged under certain *cognitive* presuppositions. The asymmetry-objection directs our attention to the tacit assumption of learning processes that are independent of good or bad will. We must therefore shift the perspective from the conception of a liberal ethics of citizenship to those large scale mental changes on the achievements of which Political Liberalism always already counts.

¹⁵ Audi and Wolterstorff, (1997), p. 117f.

Let me first focus on the change in religious consciousness that we observe in Western culture since the periods of Reformation and Enlightenment. Traditional communities of faith must process cognitive dissonances that do not equally arise for secular citizens. Sociologists have described this “modernization of religious consciousness” as a response to three challenges - first the fact of pluralism, then the emergence of modern science, and last not least the spread of positive law and a profane morality:

- Religious citizens must develop an epistemic attitude toward other religions and world views that they encounter within a universe of discourse hitherto occupied only by their own religion. They succeed to the degree that they self-reflectively relate their religious beliefs to competing doctrines in such a way that their own exclusive claim to truth can be maintained.
- Secondly, religious citizens must develop an epistemic stance toward the independence of secular from sacred knowledge and the institutionalized monopoly of modern science on what we know about states and events in the world. They succeed to the extent that they conceive the relationship of dogmatic and scientific beliefs in such a way that the autonomous progress in secular knowledge cannot come to contradict their faith.
- Religious citizens must finally develop an epistemic stance toward the priority that secular reasons enjoy in political and social arenas. They succeed to the extent that they make a transparent connection between the egalitarian individualism and universalism of modern law and morality and the premises of their own comprehensive doctrines. For this operation Rawls has offered the image of a ‘module’ fitting into different world views.

This work of hermeneutic self-reflection must be undertaken from within religious traditions. In our culture, it has essentially been performed by theology. The new epistemic attitudes are “acquired by learning” if they arise from a reconstruction of sacred truths that is compelling for people of faith in the light of modern living conditions for which no alternatives any longer exist. In the final instance it remains up to the practicing community to decide whether a dogmatic processing of the cognitive challenges of modernity has been “successful” or not; only then will the true believer accept the modernizing interpretation as the result of a “learning process”.

So far everything speaks for the thesis of an asymmetric distribution of cognitive burdens. Religious citizens, in order to come to terms with the ethical expectations of democratic

citizenship, have to learn how to adopt new epistemic attitudes toward their secular environment, whereas secular citizens are not exposed to similar cognitive dissonances in the first place. However, secular citizens are likewise not spared all cognitive burdens, since a *secularist* consciousness does not suffice for the required respect for, and cooperation with their religious fellow citizens.

As long as the secular citizens perceive religious traditions and religious communities as archaic relics of pre-modern societies that continue to exist in the present, they fall prey to what I will call a “secularist” view, secularist in the sense that they can understand freedom of religion only as the natural preservation of an endangered species. From their viewpoint, religion lacks any *intrinsic* justification to exist. The principle of the separation of state and church can for them only have the laicist meaning of sparing indifference. Citizens who adopt such an epistemic stance toward religion can obviously not be expected to take religious contributions to contentious political issues seriously - or even to help to assess them for a substance that can possibly be expressed in a secular language and justified by secular arguments. We thus discover on the secular side again certain cognitive presuppositions that are required for meeting the duties of civility and a public use of reason.

In the light of a liberal ethics of citizenship, the admission of religious statements to the political public sphere cannot mean anything but sheer window-dressing unless all citizens can be expected not to deny a priori a possible cognitive substance to these contributions. The secular citizens behave in a paternalistic, that means by Rawlsian standards in an ‘uncivil’ way if they refuse to understand their political conflict with religious opinions as a *reasonably expected disagreement* and to give public religious comments the benefit of a check whether they contain something translatable. In the absence of this epistemic attitude, a public use of reason cannot be imputed to citizens, at least not in the sense that secular citizens should be willing not to exclude religious from serious consideration.

Since such an attitude only results from a self-critical assessment of the limits of secular reason, we can now meet the initial suspicion of an unequal distribution of cognitive burdens with the argument that the liberal ethics of citizenship requires from both, religious and secular citizens, *complementary* learning processes. Secular citizens have to learn what it means to live in a post-secular society. Let me briefly outline a postmetaphysical

mentality as a mindset that represents the secular counterpart to a religious consciousness that has become self-reflective. Post-metaphysical thought draws, with no polemical intention, a strict line between faith and knowledge. But it rejects a narrow scientific conception of reason and the exclusion of religious doctrines from the genealogy of reason.

Post-metaphysical thought certainly refrains from passing ontological statements on the constitution of the whole of beings. Yet at the same time it rejects a kind of scientism that reduces our knowledge to what is, at each time, represented by the “state of the art” in natural science. The borderline often becomes blurred between proper scientific information and a naturalist world-view that is only synthesized from various scientific sources.¹⁶ This is the wrong way of naturalizing the human mind. It casts into question our practical self-understanding as persons who can take responsibility for our actions.

Post-metaphysical thought reflects on its own history. In so doing it refers, however, not only to the metaphysical heritage of Western philosophy. It discovers an internal relationship also to those world religions whose origins, like the origins of Classical Greek philosophy, date back to the middle of the first millennium before Christ – in other words to what Jaspers termed the “Axial Age”. Those religions which have their roots in the Axial Age accomplished the cognitive leap from mythical narratives to a logos that differentiates between essence and appearance in a very similar way to Greek philosophy. Ever since the Council of Nicaea, and throughout the course of a “Hellenization of Christianity”, philosophy itself took on board and assimilated many religious motifs and concepts, specifically those from the history of salvation. Concepts of Greek origin such as “autonomy” and “individuality” or Roman concepts such as “emancipation” and “solidarity” have long since been shot through with meanings of a Judaeo-Christian origin.¹⁷

Philosophy has recurrently found in its confrontation with religious traditions (and particularly with religious writers such as Kierkegaard, who think in a post-metaphysical, but not a post-Christian vein) that it receives innovative or world-disclosing stimuli. It would

¹⁶ Wolterstorff draws our attention in general to the distinction that often gets neglected in practice between secular reasons, that are meant to count, and secular world views, that like all comprehensive doctrines are not meant to count. See Audi & Wolterstorff (1997), p. 105: “Much if not most of the time we will be able to spot religious reasons from a mile away... Typically, however, comprehensive secular perspectives will go undetected.”

¹⁷ See for example Hauke Brunkhorst, *Solidarität*, (Frankfurt/Main, 2002), pp. 40-78.

not be rational to reject out of hand the conjecture that religions – as the only surviving element among the constitutive building-blocks of the Ancient cultures – manage to continue and maintain a recognized place within the differentiated edifice of Modernity because their cognitive substance has not yet been totally exhausted. There are at any rate no good reasons for denying the possibility that religions still bear a valuable semantic potential for inspiring other people beyond the limits of particular communities of faith, once that potential is only delivered in terms of its profane truth content.

In short, post-metaphysical thought is prepared to learn from religion while remaining strictly agnostic. It insists on the difference between certainties of faith and validity claims that can be publicly redeemed or criticized; but it refrains from the rationalist temptation that it can itself decide which part of a religious doctrine is rational and which part is not. This ambivalent attitude to religion expresses an epistemic attitude which secular citizens must adopt, if they are to be able and willing to learn something from religious contributions to public debates - provided it turns out to be something that can also be spelled out in a generally accessible language.

IV

In the beginning I have mentioned the sweeping religious upsurge across the world and the rather uneasy place our more or less secularized European countries occupy in view of an ever more intensive impact of politically instrumentalised religious movements. A philosophical reflection on what the liberal state must ask from its citizens leads to an account of those reflexive mentalities which are required for maintaining political integration through a normative background consensus on constitutional essentials, however thin it may be. As we have seen, a liberal ethics of citizenship depends on the improbable mind-sets that religious and secular citizens acquire in the course of complementary learning processes. Compared with the introduction of self-reflection into religious consciousness, there is a similar step towards the self-reflective overcoming of a secularist stubbornness. In the end I would like to draw two disquieting conclusions with regard to a kind of cultural polarization which we to-day observe even in the oldest and hitherto most reliable democracy on earth.

Let us assume that we face a lack of learning on one or the other side of the religious/secular divide. In such a case the means of law and politics, the only ones at the disposal of a state, are insufficient to foster those mentalities that are necessary for meeting the duties of civility and a public use of reason. Whether we may speak at all of a lack of “learning processes” is moreover a question that political theory must leave undecided. From an outside perspective philosophers cannot decide whether any “modernized” faith is still the “real” faith. And today it is impossible to decide even from inside the philosophical debate whether at the end of the day it will be secularism, embedded in a naturalist world-view, that trumps the more generous post-metaphysical thought. If, however, only participants themselves can decide whether the polarization results from a lack of “learning” or from the fact of pluralism per se, the issue of which obligations a liberal ethics of citizenship may impose can be taken to remain an essentially contested issue anyway. Such are the limits of normative Political theory.