REVIEW ARTICLE

Religion, Politics and Civic Education

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Under God? Religious Faith and Liberal Democracy
Michael J. Perry, 2003, New York, Cambridge University Press. Pp. xv+200.
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Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship
Paul J. Weithman, 2002, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press. Pp. xi+227.
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> *The proper role and influence of religion in the public
> sphere continues to be contested and has important
> implications for civic education in a liberal democracy.
> Paul Weithman and Michael Perry argue that religion
> makes valuable contributions to civic participation and
> that religiously grounded beliefs should be fully welcome in
> political decision-making. In response, this paper strives for
> a middle ground of preparing citizens to engage thoughtfully
> with a wide range of moral perspectives, religious and
> otherwise, while promoting a civic virtue that still honours
> a commitment to public reason.*

To what extent, and in what ways, should religious conviction inform the exercise of political power? While the predominant theoretical response to this question advocates strong limits on the role of religion in political decision-making, some thoughtful voices continue to disagree. Two recent expressions of dissent are offered by Paul Weithman and Michael Perry. The implications of their arguments, though they do not completely succeed, are substantial and important for civic education. While addressed specifically to the civic and political context of the United States—especially the American tradition of separating church and state— these arguments have purchase in any liberal democratic society that grapples with how to incorporate religiously motivated citizens into the public sphere. Whether measured by the contents of civics standards, textbooks or standardised assessments, the relative inattention of schools

to the influence of religion in civic and political life hinders efforts to prepare students for their real-life roles as citizens.

For many citizens, religious commitment and civic participation are deeply interwoven. To expect these citizens to ignore their moral sources when engaging in civic dialogue threatens to disenfranchise a vital segment of society. But rather than rejecting the standard liberal concept of 'public reason', as Perry and Weithman advocate, a broader conception of the civic realm is needed. Through my critique of Perry's and Weithman's arguments, I shall forward the claim that civic speech—how people talk together about their moral differences and how to live together in spite of them—must be conceived as extending beyond the narrower political realm in which decisions about the use of coercive state power are made. Preparing citizens to engage thoughtfully and respectfully in this broader conversation requires a civic education in which students can grapple with a range of moral perspectives, religious and otherwise. This forges, in effect, a middle ground between the restrictions on religion demanded by public reason and the full-throated expression of a religiously grounded politics that Perry and Weithman seek to defend.

RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS AND REALISED CITIZENSHIP

Weithman's argument focuses on the concept of 'realised citizenship'. Beyond its legal status, the citizenship that Weithman has in mind is an achievement, involving both opportunities and resources. Individuals must both *identify* with their citizenship (thinking of themselves as having the rights, interests, duties and powers of citizens) and have the 'resources of information, skills, networks, and influence' (p. 14) necessary to *exercise* them. Government action—through encouraging political commentary and voter participation, for instance—is certainly one mechanism by which people realise their citizenship, but much of this formation occurs in civil society as well.

In particular, Weithman contends, churches and other religious organisations play a vital and under-recognised role in helping many Americans to realise their citizenship. To support this, he cites ample and compelling empirical data that involvement in churches and other religious organisations is a prime mechanism for fostering interest and participation in politics, especially for the poor and for minorities. For instance, research has illustrated a direct correlation between voting and religious affiliation; no other institutional affiliation comes close to such a strong link. According to Weithman, those data even suggest a causal role here: churches and other religious institutions *foster* voter participation, apparently more effectively than any other institution in American society. Beyond voting, Weithman cites data which suggest churches and other religious organisations encourage commitment to participation in local politics and provide egalitarian opportunities to acquire and practise civic skills (far more than labour unions, interestingly). Weithman places particular emphasis on the role of religious organisations in providing

equality of opportunity; the role of African-American churches is especially prominent in this regard.

Beyond the significant role that these religious organisations play in political enfranchisement of otherwise underrepresented groups, such data hold powerful implications for the texture of realised citizenship. Religious institutions, Weithman notes, will naturally provide participants with religious reasons for action and often foster a conception of citizenship associated with 'religious norms, duties, and ideals' (p. 48). Congregants will often adopt political positions favoured by their churches, as well as the religious arguments given to support those stances; they begin to see voting and political activism as a duty, albeit a religious one; and they conceive of themselves as empowered citizens who seek the (religiously informed) common good. Put simply, 'Churches make American politics more democratic by providing citizens with opportunities to participate in political life, by encouraging them to identify with their citizenship, and by contributing to civic argument and public political debate' (p. 69).

The religiously inspired texture of these otherwise laudable civic results raises serious concerns for many democratic theorists, however, who fear illiberal imposition of religious views on the general public through the political process. Weithman acknowledges these concerns, but argues the virtue of a sort of cost-benefit analysis between the ways in which religious groups foster realised citizenship and the related dangers of incivility and oppression. Simply put, Weithman claims that these dangers are overblown and outweighed by the substantial benefits of realised citizenship that religious affiliation provides. He believes this liberal overreaction is a result of most philosophical work on religion and democratic decision-making being done by Americans, whose arguments and assumptions are disproportionately influenced by the loud voice of religious conservatives in American politics.

Religious affiliation not only fosters civic participation, Weithman adds, but can also provide language and passion that spurs profound social and political change. He points to the 'shock value' that religious speech can provide, such as when public policies or institutions are described in provocative terms such as sin and evil. He cites the widely influential pastoral letter by Catholic bishops in 1986, which—in strongly theological terms—called for attention to the poor, and the obviously pivotal and religiously oriented efforts of Martin Luther King Jnr in pursuit of social justice. Weithman also sees this relationship between religion and politics as *mutually* edifying. Not only can religiously informed politics generate participation and provide new insight, but the public milieu of much political advocacy can impel religious groups to refine their positions and arguments in response to opposing viewpoints.

Perry shares Weithman's appreciation for the influence of religious commitment on civic participation and discourse. Rather than offering a descriptive analysis, however, he approaches the issue from multiple theoretical perspectives, each with its own intended audience. He addresses Part One to those who support a strict separation of religion

and politics, and argues that neither the US Constitution nor the morality of liberal democracy conflict with religiously informed politics. Part Two, addressed to *supporters* of such politics, analyses how citizens should let their religious convictions inform the ongoing socio-political controversies involving same-sex unions and abortion.

Of all these issues, the central question for civic education, I believe, is to what extent the morality of liberal democracy can accommodate the influence of religious convictions in the political realm. Put another way: when discussing and making decisions about how people will live together amidst inevitable disagreement about 'the good life', is there a civically beneficial role for religion to play? While the answers may shift according to socio-political context, this question is certainly applicable beyond the particulars of the American milieu. A closer look at the strengths and weaknesses of Weithman's and Perry's arguments provides insight into the question, particularly surrounding the ways in which religion can join the conversation more fully while central liberal principles are preserved.

LOOSENING LIBERAL BOUNDARIES

Both Weithman and Perry reject the predominant version of modern liberalism as introduced by John Rawls and refined by many theorists since. Weithman contends that responsible citizenship precludes citizens neither from offering exclusively religious arguments in public political debate nor from basing their votes solely on such reasoning. Arguing from a similar perspective, Perry's latest work represents a substantial departure from his 1993 *Love and Power*, wherein he sought to advocate for greater attention to religious perspectives *within* the broader liberal framework, an approach he termed 'ecumenical politics'.

In the 'standard approach' (as Weithman terms it) to religion's role in politics, justifications for the use of political power must be accessible via 'public reason'—reasons that informed and rational people would recognise as compelling. By contrast, Weithman seems to rely on a faith that extremist groups (religious and otherwise) will naturally and gradually modulate their approach. 'The force of public opinion and the responsiveness of politically active organizations to it', Weithman writes, 'are among the equilibrating forces of democratic society' (p. 162). As evidence of this phenomenon, he cites Pat Robertson's 1999 acknowledgment that a Constitutional ban on abortion was politically unrealistic, and that a 'strategic, incremental approach is much more effective' (p. 142, n. 9). But his example exposes a vital difference between modifications based on liberal commitments and those based on political expediency: Robertson's shift in approach would seem to be not so much a modulation of his position (i.e. that abortion should be outlawed) as a tactic to make it happen through more subtle, gradual means.

Both Perry and Weithman offer substantial insights and data regarding the current landscape of religion in America, and both are deeply sceptical of the possibility of religiously induced strife in twenty-first century

America. Perry repeatedly cautions the reader not to impose images of centuries-old religious nightmares on modern American democracy, and suggests that the extreme safeguards imposed in response to past conflict are 'not necessarily the best arrangement for our time and place' (p. 49). We might wonder if he would similarly caution the French as they debate whether Muslim headscarves should be allowed in state schools.

The health of liberal democracy depends heavily on protecting citizens from illiberal coercion; with the stakes so high, Perry is not content to rely entirely on 'equilibrating forces' to moderate extreme positions. As a brake on oppressive political advocacy—whether religiously inspired or not—Perry points to the foundational liberal commitments to human inviolability and basic human freedoms, such as free expression, property and political participation. But while Rawlsian liberals see these commitments as invalidating Perry's agenda, he insists otherwise. 'Nothing in the commitment to the true and full humanity of every person or in the allied commitment to certain basic human freedoms', he claims, 'forbids legislators or other policymakers to disfavor conduct on the basis of a religiously grounded moral belief *just in virtue of the fact that the belief is religiously grounded*' (p. 46). By 'religiously grounded', Perry refers to convictions that are based solely on religious premises (e.g. rooted in God-inspired texts or proclaimed by God-anointed figures); in the absence of these religious sources, the belief would not be held.

The implications here are striking: according to Perry, a citizen would not violate the morality of liberal democracy if her only reason for advocating or voting for a policy that restricted others' freedom was her interpretation of religious scripture. At this point, Perry anticipates a common objection, which he terms 'the argument from respect': basing a restrictive law solely on religious grounds denies non-believers their respect as free and equal persons. Perry counters that as long as citizens offer others their best reasons for such a law, respect is not denied. Here he offers a twofold qualification: (1) these 'best reasons' cannot deny the humanity of others (e.g. a Nazi's reasons to his Jewish victim) and (2) one must seek out reasons that others might have for supporting the policy. If one fails in this latter effort, however, she is still justified in her original political actions.

But consider how this principle of good intentions sometimes plays out. Well-meaning citizens from religious denomination x hold a local voting majority. Since they interpret their scriptures to require a weekly day of rest, all stores must be closed on this day. This restriction, applicable to all residents, hardly denies anyone's humanity, but try as the proponents might, no compelling justifications for this law are found outside of their scriptures. The problem is, store-owners from religion y feel personally obliged to close their stores for religious reasons on a different day, so they lose two days of income. If a coercive law such as this can only be justified via faith in some supernatural revelation, it is hard to see how those who do not share that faith are being afforded respect. The standard approach seeks to avoid this scenario.

Weithman assails the standard approach's very notion of justification. Because reasonable disagreement will exist regarding what reasons are in

fact justifying, he claims, the standard approach is overly restrictive. He echoes a common charge against Rawls's political liberalism (representative of the standard approach) that we have no reliable standards of judgement when discussing the requirements of reason. Rawls's notions of reciprocity and the burdens of judgement, for example, are criticised for being overly vague.

While we can all admit that no guarantee of agreement on 'the reasonable' exists, it would be hard to imagine a just political realm in which the principles of reciprocity (mutual goodwill grounded in fair rules of cooperation) and acceptance of the burdens of judgement (recognising that people will inevitably disagree about conceptions of the good and the right) were rejected by all or even most citizens. To reject these is to reject the very basis of respect for persons, because it denies our basic moral equivalence. Moreover, even if Rawls is wrong to believe that a common reasonableness is enough to generate consensus on a specific conception of justice, such a consensus may not be necessary to a politics of mutual respect; a common reasonableness that serves to constrain the level of moral disagreement over such principles is still a viable and vital element of the civic realm.

Weithman also criticises Rawls's political liberalism for its claim to be independent of comprehensive doctrine, and here his point is well taken. Attempts to construct a 'thin' political liberalism inevitably require a more comprehensive bulwark of beliefs about the good, and this of course implies conflict with at least some conceptions of the good life. Veit Bader (1999) puts it bluntly: there is a 'price to be paid for living in modern societies and under liberal-democratic constitutions' (p. 616). The price is a limit on the arguments citizens should make when the political coercion of others is at stake. Since some moral frameworks fit more easily within the boundaries of public reason, the standard approach will unavoidably impinge on some frameworks more than others. But contrary to Weithman's implication, however, these restrictions do not constitute disrespect for those who hold certain (particularly religious) beliefs. Rather, they help to safeguard a social and political environment in which respect can flourish. The notion of a fully neutral political realm in which everyone is fully respected and yet all moral frameworks are entirely acceptable is incoherent.

The implications of this non-neutral accessibility doctrine for civic education are substantial, Weithman observes: citizens will need to 'identify with a certain specification of their citizenship. Citizens will have to think of themselves, perhaps implicitly, as persons who are owed reasons that satisfy those criteria' of accessibility and reasonableness (p. 132). Weithman sees this as problematic because, among other things, it threatens to marginalise those whose realised citizenship has emerged from religious roots and often has little concern with reciprocity and the burdens of judgement. The result, Weithman warns, is that religiously informed viewpoints cannot receive an adequate hearing in the public square, and a vital portion of the polity faces disenfranchisement. In what follows I attempt to explain how civic education can work against this outcome.

MORE THAN POLITICAL: RELIGION IN THE CIVIC REALM

The disenfranchisement Weithman warns against need not occur, even within the standard approach. One feature of the standard approach that deserves closer attention, especially when considering the role of religion in the public square, involves crucial distinctions between the civic and political realms.[1] These distinctions prove vital in all liberal democracies, not just the American context.

The broader civic realm is where citizens' various moral convictions interact with those who do not necessarily share their perspective, where they work out how they are going to live together in society. Public schools are one of the key elements of this civic realm. Our willingness to compromise with and accommodate differing but reasonable moral perspectives—the heart of respect in a pluralistic society—cannot develop unless these viewpoints, religious or otherwise, are given room for expression in civic discourse. This enables a conversation in which understanding, tolerance and—in some cases—respect for their reasonableness can develop.

Within this civic sphere exists the *subset* of the political, which involves the coercive use of state power in determining how people will live together. It is in this narrower political realm where the standard approach's requirements of 'public reason' stake their claim. Why is this distinction so vital? It is important to recognise that civic speech—how people talk together about their moral differences and how to live together respectfully in spite of them—is a far broader realm than simply political. That is, decisions about the use of state power are only a small part of the larger civic dialogue where citizens share their various moral perspectives and seek ways to live together in mutual respect. Along these lines, Perry commends David Hollenbach's (1999) assertion that the most appropriate fora for civic dialogue involving religion are civic (but not directly political) settings such as universities, the arts and the media.

This broader civic realm provides room for the type of religiously inspired realised citizenship Weithman describes, even within the standard approach. Weithman addresses the possibility of an approach involving such civic–political distinctions, and acknowledges that it would allow religious organisations significant opportunity for contributions informed by their comprehensive moral visions while still protecting public political debate and voting from religious imposition. Weithman then rejects this alternative as unfeasible, but his arguments against it are unconvincing.

First, he claims that

> as a sociological matter ... those who think they should be ready to produce accessible reasons in public political debate tend to insist on them in civic argument as well. One result is that the distinctive moral argument which was to be among churches' contributions to democracy is eliminated even from discussions in which it is ostensibly permissible (p. 141).

Weithman acknowledges he can provide no empirical evidence for this claim, but contends that 'ample anecdotal evidence' supports it, although

he cites only one example. He continues with assertions from another discipline: 'As a matter of psychological fact, it is easy to slide from the belief that not everyone regards nonaccessible reasons as good reasons for political outcomes to the belief that nonaccessible reasons are bad reasons for those outcomes' (p. 141). Weithman concludes by claiming that this will result in people feeling compelled to avoid these bad, non-accessible reasons in all spheres, whether political or more broadly civic.

Perry also criticises the attempt to distinguish between the broader civic realm and a more restrictive political subset.

> Rather than try to do the impossible—maintain a wall of separation ('an airtight barrier') between the religiously grounded moral discourse that inevitably and properly takes place in public culture . . . on the one side, and the discourse that takes place in public political argument . . . on the other side—we should simply welcome the presentation of religiously grounded moral belief in *all* areas of our public culture (p. 43).

But we need not accept Perry's stark choice between an airtight barrier and 'anything goes' in political decision-making.[2] The capacity to make such distinctions—albeit not airtight—can and should be a major purpose of civic education in a liberal democracy.

CIVIC EDUCATION: IN PURSUIT OF THE IDEAL

Is it possible that these crucial distinctions between civic and political can be blurred, thus reducing the opportunity that religious frameworks have to contribute to civic dialogue? Certainly it is—and this seems to be the case at present in the debate over the role of religion in the public square. But if the theoretical distinction between civic and political is a sound one, and if we remain sceptical of claims about the sociological and psychological inevitability of their blurring, then civic education has a vital role to play here.

Put simply, schools are a prime setting for civic dialogue to occur, and for youth to gain skills in it and commitment to it. Schools should include religious perspectives in the conversation, not only because such contributions can often prove illuminating and valuable, but because they are an undeniable part of the civic conversation in pluralistic society. For this reason, students of all religious backgrounds, including non-believers, need to learn how to engage in that conversation, and yet still recognise that civic virtue is most fully realised when people are willing and able to advocate *political* decisions based on the requirements of public reason.

If, as Weithman contends, religious affiliation and involvement is the sole route by which some participants realise their citizenship, civic education faces a challenging but vital role in *enlarging* that notion of citizenship. Perry argues correctly that were citizens somehow legally restricted from bringing their religious convictions to bear on political decision-making, it would reduce their citizenship to second-class status. Were this even possible, it would not be advisable. But when considering

the nature of civic *virtue*—and thus what civic education seeks to foster—a citizenship that relies wholly on religious grounding for its moral judgements about how we all live together *is* in fact second best.

Interestingly, Perry himself seems to concede this point. A central claim of his book is that sole reliance on religiously informed morality in the political realm does not violate the morality of liberal democracy. The closing pages of *Under God?* offer a decidedly different emphasis, however, one featuring political dialogue and tolerance. Describing the 'ecumenical politics' he advocated a decade earlier as 'still ... the right ideal', Perry observes that 'a sectarian model of religious participation in politics is more likely, when successful in achieving its political objective, to tear the bonds of political community than to strengthen them' (pp. 128, 129). So even if the virtues of reasonable disagreement, compromise and accommodation exceed the base requirements of liberal democracy, it seems apparent that Perry would nonetheless embrace them as worthy civic goals.

One crucial goal of civic education should include striving to help students recognise the importance of seeking shared reasons in demonstrating respect toward others, and to encourage the practice of giving such reasons in the political realm. This sort of reasonableness *should* be the supreme virtue in the political realm, when state power is in question. To the extent that the requirements of reasonableness conflict with an individual's religious (or other comprehensive) framework, the conflict is real and the adherent will have to choose between modifying the application of her convictions to public policy or giving up on civic virtue. But civic education should also make clear to the student that giving up on civic virtue imperils respect for her beliefs as well.

While Weithman's and Perry's visions of citizenship may not provide sufficient safeguard against illiberal and oppressive politics, the case they make for how deeply religion and politics are interwoven in the lives of many citizens should not be discounted when we consider the content of civic education in a liberal democracy. When the breadth of the civic realm—and the need to include religious perspectives in the conversation—gets overlooked, the polity is left with what Jeffrey Stout (1988) characterises as 'the Kantian form of Esperanto' (p. 286). Civic education based on this model avoids consideration of the rich moral sources that actually animate our lives; instead, schools are forced to rely on increasingly vague versions of 'values we all share'. Civic education should rather seek to prepare students for a world in which political questions about the good life are inevitable and respect compels us to grapple with their moral diversity; an immediate retreat to 'values we all share' does little to help students engage with the complex reality of the public square.

Because of this religious illiteracy, Perry avers, 'We probably need reminding that, at its best, religious discourse in public culture is not less dialogic—not less open-minded, not less deliberative—than is, at its best, secular discourse in public culture' (p. 42). The problem, of course, is that public religious discourse is rarely at its best; but the blame for this shortcoming can hardly be placed only at the feet of the religious. An increasingly diverse society should not lead citizens to shy away from

in-depth exploration of and deliberation about their moral convictions, whether influenced by religion or not. Rather, the need to engage and respect this diversity *demands* that schools prepare citizens to do this. But to expect this respectful engagement by citizens who have not had the opportunity to develop these skills in the public educational realm seems unrealistic. As Michael Walzer (1995) observes, 'Democracy is still, always, a politics of strain ... That is why education is so important—school learning (also practical experience) aimed at producing the patience, stamina, tolerance and receptiveness without which the strain will not be understood or accepted' (p. 30). Inviting religion into the civic conversation is a daunting challenge, but one worth the strain.

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NOTES

1. While most standard approaches use the term *public* to denote the *political* (e.g. 'public reason'), this is misleading. In common parlance, the idea of our public life together includes far more than just the political (i.e. the exercise of state power). This distinction is also drawn in Benhabib (1996), Hollenbach (1999) and Strike (1994).
2. This type of Manichean thinking is employed by those who would seek religion's total absence from the civic sphere as well. There exists a strand in current psychological research which contends that, even for religious believers, moral convictions exist separate from religious conviction; accordingly, moral education can and should be addressed apart from religious considerations (see Nucci, 2001). To the extent that political issues carry a moral subtext (stem-cell research, for example), this contention is most significant, as it implies that civic discourse about such controversies can (and should) ignore religion altogether. What this research fails to recognise, however, is that most religious adherents live their lives amidst an ongoing dialectic between their religious precepts, moral intuitions, and personal experiences (Kunzman, 2003).

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