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Politicising Religions

Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion: Philosophische Aufsätze, by Jürgen Habermas. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2005. 372 pp. Euro 24.80 (cloth); euro 16.80 (paper).

The Liberal Conscience: Politics and Principle in a World of Religious Pluralism, by Lucas Swaine. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. 240 pp. \$35 (cloth).

Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship, by Paul J. Weithman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002/2006. 240 pp. \$70.00 (cloth); \$34.99 (paper).

I

The norm for secular discourse has been to present the politicisation of religion as something to be avoided. Recently, however, there has emerged a tendency in European and American political theory to claim that religions *can* play a legitimate, positive role in public debates and political life. Some defend this point of view with reference to the religious heritage of a national political community and the benevolent influence of dominant (Christian) confessions in everyday social practice, while others emphasise the equal worth of religious citizens and conceive the public expression of religion to be a necessary way of dealing with religious pluralism in democratic states. The three books to be reviewed participate in this trend, each resisting the strict separation of religion and politics associated with secularism.

The notion of *politicising religions* is simultaneously a subjective and an objective genitive: religions are both *politicising* and undergoing *politicisation*. Some believers enter the political arena in order to render public policy more congruent with their religious values. They understand themselves as actively engaged in politicising. At the same time, *as* religious people they

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are regulated, positively and negatively, by a broad range of public policies, political rhetoric, symbols, and traditions. As such, they are the objects, rather than the agents, of politicisation. This double sense of “politicising religions” indicates the instability of the relationship between religion and politics and the multiple meanings of secularism explored in the books under review.

According to the dominant version of secularism, political institutions are to be organised in a way that is independent and free of religion. This institutional arrangement is justified by the use of secular or public reason: in order to organise a neutral political realm capable of impartial decisions based on commonly accessible reasons, religious beliefs must be translated into a common political language. Religion and politics are to be separated for the purpose of tolerance, impartiality, neutrality and universality, and liberty and equality. For Habermas, Swaine, and Weithman, however, secularism is not the precondition of democracy; rather, it is itself a belief structure in negotiation and contestation with other narratives, all of which together constitute the operative field of communal imagination, identification, and belonging.

II

In *The Liberal Conscience* Lucas Swaine focuses on the reasons for religious people to affirm liberal principles and institutions. His point of departure is the hard case of theocrats, for he considers the conflict between theocrats and liberals on liberal rights and freedoms to be the crucial puzzle of religion and politics today. Neither side takes the other seriously, but conceives it as irrational and illegitimate. For Swaine, the task of liberal government is precisely to establish a frame of mutual coexistence of religions rather than unanimous opposition to religion. Therefore, he emphasises that if one wants theocrats to affirm liberal principles and institutions, one has to allow their religious beliefs to be decisive rather than to insist that they translate those beliefs into a common, secular language. It is a matter of understanding and working on these points of view, of engaging in a dialogue involving both theocrats and liberals. In that sense, Swaine unties the provisos of reasoning associated with the political doctrines of secularism and allows the theocrats to have a public voice that is premised on their otherworldly values.

Swaine conceives his position as an elaboration of the political liberalism of John Rawls, for he too emphasises the reasonableness of the

theocrats' commitments to their religious idea of the good. The focal point of this elaboration is Swaine's three principles of liberty of conscience: (1) *the principle of rejection* (one must be free by conscience to reject what one conceives as lesser religious doctrines), (2) *the principle of affirmation* (one must be free to accept an idea of the good), and (3) *the principle of distinction* (one must be free to distinguish between good and bad doctrines). Swaine is convinced that theocrats will endorse these principles not only because they guarantee freedom of religion and the respectful and peaceful practice of religious beliefs and rituals, but also because they see that the different religious conceptions of the good that they live by are not unambiguous and beyond dispute. If anything, they are under continuous debate and interpretation. Swaine discerns within these theological debates the opportunity for theocrats to affirm (liberal, democratic) principles of liberty of conscience. On the basis of a shared commitment to the principles of liberty of conscience, theocrats and liberals can negotiate a common political platform for religious pluralism.

But does Swaine's political liberalism offer an adequate answer to the challenges posed by theocrats to liberal rights and freedoms? On one hand, Swaine allows theocrats to retain their religious beliefs while engaging in political reasoning. But, on the other hand, he adjusts the theocrat's reasoning to liberal principles and institutions, thus restoring the priority of the political over the theological. This prioritising is to be enforced indirectly: "The point is that it will generally be better to try to convince or persuade theocrats to turn away from their more illiberal inclinations before leaving it to government to employ coercion against them" (p. 161). At the end of the day, Swaine's harmonious political community, which adopts religious pluralism and is constituted by public reasoning, once again reinstates the secularist logic of separating religion and politics. Furthermore, this secular order is an enforced *modus vivendi* more than a reasoned affirmation of liberal principles by theocrats and liberals. In other words, there is a shift in focus from the subjective genitive to the objective genitive in politicising religions.

III

In his latest collection of essays, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion* (*Between Naturalism and Religion*),¹ Jürgen Habermas engages debates on the role of religion in late modern societies, especially the political role of religion in the public sphere. His point of reference here is the relationship

between political liberalism and deliberative democracy.² Habermas criticises the strict separation of religion and politics, and articulates the conditions under which it is legitimate for religion to have a voice in political matters. He would take issue with Swaine's idea of the public use of reason by liberals and theocrats insofar as Swaine's notion of the liberty of conscience is too narrow—it fails to discuss the broader processes of will- and opinion-formation. For Habermas, it is not only a question of liberal principles and institutions, but also one of the inclusive character of the public sphere and the deliberative mode of democracy. Thus, in a *normative political* sense he distinguishes his own position from political liberalism by emphasising the public sphere as the site where religious points of view are voices among others in the deliberation of political matters. With this point of reference, the religious beliefs of citizens are recognised as a worthy source of democratic energy.

At the same time, however, Habermas defends a secular state that has to filter religious arguments beforehand. The secular state has to be neutral and impartial in order to treat all citizens equally, irrespective of religious affiliation. Whereas religious points of view are legitimate in the public sphere, they have to be translated in order to gain legitimacy in political institutions, especially parliaments. From Habermas's point of view, this *normative political* defence of a secular state has *epistemic* pre-conditions in terms of cognitive conditions and epistemic attitudes that prioritise the distinction between faith and knowledge. In other words, when making legitimate political decisions one has to be able to distinguish between faith and knowledge with reference to the latter as a kind of insight that can be validated and, thus, constitute the basis for political decision making. The political processes are conceived as learning processes that induce self-reflexivity and critique, on the part of both religious and secular people. This goes on as a process of mutual recognition that is open toward religious points of view. However, the *telos* of the learning process operative in the deliberation of common matters is the translation of particularistic points of view into a common language.

Like Swaine, Habermas ends up giving priority to an idea of secular reason in political institutions. But in emphasising the need for an open and fair process of public deliberation through which to create and recreate a liberal political culture, Habermas seeks to go beyond Swaine's narrow focus on the principles of liberty of conscience. Furthermore, he finds the normative political principles of how one "ought" to solve problems of the religion/politics relationship in an epistemological perspective of how one "can" approach these problems cognitively in the political processes of

democratic negotiation. From this point of view he shifts the focus from the subjective genitive to the objective genitive in politicising religions: at first he lets believers engage politically in public debates, but he ends up restricting this engagement with reference to the legitimate reasoning in a secular state.

IV

In *Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship*, Paul J. Weithman focuses on the role of religion in political decision making and asks how religious people can be good citizens in a liberal democratic regime and political culture. Contrary to Habermas and Swaine, Weithman does not presuppose that religious points of view are to be translated at a moment in the democratic deliberation. If a liberal democratic regime affirms religious pluralism and the equal treatment of all citizens, it does not make sense to give priority to secular liberal principles and political institutions and their implicit mode of reasoning. What is required is, instead, sensitivity to comprehensive religious doctrines on their own terms. We see here that Weithman, like Habermas and Swaine, adopts the vocabulary of Rawls's political liberalism. Unlike Swaine, however, Weithman focuses on the soft case of benevolent religious movements and institutions rather than the hard case of theocrats. From his point of view, the crucial argument is that churches prepare their members to be able to recognise and participate in common matters. By practical experience they understand themselves as participants in collective action, and, thus, religious belonging can pave the way for civil education and an ethics of citizenship.

Weithman emphasises that religious people may participate in democratic deliberation and political decision making on the basis of their religious beliefs as long as they are convinced that their participation and points of view contribute to the common good. He considers this kind of justification to be an obligation of citizenship. Reasonableness consists, then, in the capacity to test one's views (whether they are religious or secular) in the light of the common good. In other words, the political community consists of a plurality of reasonable comprehensive doctrines. However, according to Weithman, this reasonableness coexists with deep disagreement over *why* the principles and institutions of a liberal democratic regime should be affirmed. There is no one ground of affirmation: as long as one has a ground for cooperating with others and contributing to the common good, and as long as one participates in the conflict over interpretations of liberal principles

in a way that does not violate them, then one has a legitimate voice in the democratic negotiation. For Weithman, it violates the principle of the equal worth of all citizens to adopt the language of an overlapping consensus whereby liberal principles are affirmed exclusively through the public use of reason. Rather than presuming an opposition between a reasoned overlapping consensus and a mere power balance (*modus vivendi*), one should open one's eyes to other possibilities.

The one that Weithman prefers is a *modus vivendi* stabilised by habit wherein citizens are reasonable, but disagree deeply. Weithman points to the multiple variations and degrees of religious beliefs, arguments, and points of view that could be brought into play in public debates and political decision making. In other words, one has to be sensitive to the concrete circumstances and contextual features of the political communities where the religion/politics relationships are questioned, rather than give priority to abstract criteria of reasoning. According to Weithman, the focal point should be the concrete habits, values, and norms of a country that citizens can learn and incorporate by means of practical experience in public deliberation and common action. At this point, the churches can also contribute by preparing their members for this civil engagement. This contextual conception of democratic political processes includes sensitivity to the actually existing religious groups and communities of a society and their contested points of view and self-understandings. Insofar as concrete habits, values, and norms constitute an authoritative point of reference for Weithman, he shifts from the subjective to the objective genitive of the nexus, making religion an object for politicisation and thus opening the way for the inclusion or exclusion of religions by political regulation. It seems, then, that Weithman could have gone a step further in his critique of the political doctrines of secularism, rather than reiterating dominant habits, values, and norms of a national political community.

V

Despite their differences, the three books under review seem to fall over the same stumbling block. They approach the question of the legitimate role of religion in public debates and political life within the frame of political liberalism. From this point of view, they bring relevant principled matters, democratic political processes, and practical experiences of the religion/politics relationship to the fore with the aim of going beyond a dualistic opposition between religion and politics based on moral and political certainties.

Instead they aim at promoting engagement, dialogue, and interpretation of the citizenry by some kind of democratic negotiation of moral and political uncertainties and ambiguities. However, they seem to be blind to how their quest to include religions in public debates makes religion an *object* of politicisation. Within the frame of political liberalism, they establish an endpoint that closes down the possibility of ongoing democratic negotiations. Rather than closure, the double sense and ambiguity of the religion/politics nexus highlight the tension between affirming and criticising the *pluralism* of democratic politics.

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Notes

1. An English translation, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, will be published by Polity Press in 2007.

2. Cf. also the debate between Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls: Jürgen Habermas, "Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls's *Political Liberalism*," *Journal of Philosophy* 92, no. 3 (1995): 109-31; and John Rawls, "Reply to Habermas," *Journal of Philosophy* 92, no. 3 (1995): 132-80.

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