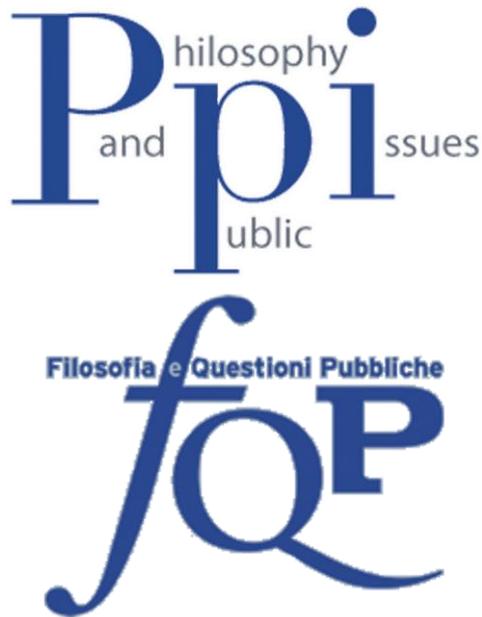


SYMPOSIUM  
LIBERAL LEGITIMACY, PUBLIC REASON AND  
CITIZENS OF FAITH



DOES LIBERAL THEORY  
NEED RELIGION?

SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE “RELIGIOUS  
ASPECTS” OF LIBERAL THEORY

BY  
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# Does Liberal Theory Need Religion?

## Some Considerations on the “Religious Aspects” of Liberal Theory

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**T**his paper aims at pointing out some theoretical problems one can find in Chapter 10 of Paul Weithman’s *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*. In that chapter (titled “Does justice as fairness have a religious aspect?”) Weithman argues that “John Rawls’s work on justice has a religious aspect”, and that “justice as fairness tries to answer some of the questions traditional religion also tries to answer” (Weithman 2016, 213). The perspective from which Weithman works here is somehow unusual in liberal theory. In fact, liberalism has commonly been concerned with how liberal institutions can guarantee the peaceful coexistence of different religious, moral and political worldviews. In other words, the relationship between liberal theory and religion has been considered from the point of view of liberalism. Here Weithman looks at the same relationship, but from the side of religion. However, as the following pages will show, Weithman’s discourse on the religious aspects of liberal theory is too vague and runs the risk of not taking seriously enough religious pluralism, whose relevance both in Rawls’ and in Weithman’s work is difficult to underestimate.

Before going into some details of Weithman’s account of the religious aspect of Rawlsian liberalism, in the next Section I will

sketch a distinction between two ways of conceiving of the liberal theory/religion relationship. Then, in Section II, I will locate Weithman's view within this distinction, and underline some problems it presents.

## I

The relationship between liberal theory and religion(s) can be looked at from two somehow specular perspectives: a) from the side of liberal theory, and b) from the side of religion. In the first case, the main issue is how, whether, and under which conditions liberal theory can accommodate religious pluralism. The second perspective considers whether a religious (although not necessarily theistic) attitude can be consistent with liberal theory, namely how a generally religious orientation can coexist with liberal tenets.

In the recent literature, especially for those political theorists working within the Rawlsian framework, a) is the dominant perspective. In fact, a paradigmatic formulation of perspective a) is present in Rawls's *Political Liberalism*: "how is it possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens, who remain profoundly divided by reasonable *religious*, philosophical, and moral doctrines?" (Rawls 1993, 4, my emphasis).

Thus, Rawls's philosophical project consists in making possible a peaceful, just, and stable coexistence of different worldviews within the same liberal society and under the same political institutions. In other words, and if one thinks more specifically to religion, Rawls deals with how liberal theory can accommodate in fair and stable ways the fact of religious pluralism.

A closer look at a) gives us the opportunity to distinguish between two ways of understanding the liberal theory/religion

distinction from the side of liberal theory. In fact, we have  $a_1$ ), the case in which religion is the “handmaiden of justice” (Spinner-Halev 2008, 563) and  $a_2$ ), a pluralistic balance between different moral and political values (liberty, equality, justice, stability, toleration, etc.).

$a_1$ ) entails an imperialistic (*ibid.*, 554) conception of liberalism. According to the advocates of  $a_1$ ), religions are acceptable only as far as they are consistent with the principles of liberal justice. This give a quite unrestricted role to liberal principles of justice. For through the action of the State, they are allowed to permeate the internal life of religious groups. If this happens partial associations are required to mirror the liberal principles of justice even in their internal organization. This will quite reasonably end up in giving an extensive power to the State and in curtailing freedom of association, which is one of the more momentous traditional liberal freedoms.

$a_2$ ) is much more inclusive and diversity friendly than its counterpart.  $a_2$ ) in fact admits that in a liberal society there could be illiberal religious groups, as far as social pluralism is guaranteed and those individuals who reject the subjection to the power of their groups have the so called “right to exit.” In other words they should have the opportunity to dissociate from a group whose authority looks unacceptable.

Now, if we go to consider b), we can have two possibilities as well. As one will remember, with b) we debate whether a religious attitude, what we will call henceforth “religious temperament”, can be consistent with liberal theory. In this case, almost intuitively, we have:  $b_1$ ), stating that a religious temperament is consistent with liberal theory; and  $b_2$ ), which denies the consistency between religious temperament and liberal theory.

Before discussing Weithman's reading of Rawls as an instance of b<sub>1</sub>), a definition and an explanation of "religious temperament" is needed.

Thomas Nagel has introduced the concept of "religious temperament" in the recent philosophical debate. In Nagel's words, religious temperament is "the appropriate name for a disposition to seek a view of the world that can play a certain role in the inner life – a role that for some people is occupied by religion" (Nagel 2009, 4). Nagel contends that most of analytical philosophers are devoid of religious temperament. Thus, because of their lack of religious temperament, analytical philosophers have neglected the so-called "cosmic question". This is a question concerning the "sense not merely of our lives, but of everything." (*ibid.*). When philosophers deal with the cosmic question, they go beyond a mere consideration of their life, their individual flourishing and accomplishments, in order to consider the meaning of the world as a whole. When someone faces the cosmic question, he/she is not searching for the conditions of his/her own salvation. Rather, a philosopher who confronts the cosmic question has to do with these thoughts: "How can one bring into one's individual life a recognition of one's relation to the universe as a whole, whatever that relation is?" (*ibid.*, 6).

## II

As already stated in the first lines of this paper, Weithman argues that Rawls's conception of justice, justice as fairness, has a religious aspect. Furthermore, Weithman claims that justice as fairness aims at giving an answer to questions that traditionally religions have been busy in facing. To use once again Nagel's words, one would say that justice as fairness tries to answer the cosmic question. In our taxonomy, Weithman's account of

Rawlsian theory is a clear example of b<sub>1</sub>): Rawls's religious temperament is consistent with his liberal philosophical orientation up to the point that justice as fairness itself tries to give an answer to the cosmic question. In what follows, we will explain in some depth Rawls's religious temperament and especially the ways in which justice as fairness, due to its religious aspect, answers the cosmic question.

That John Rawls had a religious temperament is now well recognized within the community of Rawls' scholars. For instance, Thomas Nagel and Joshua Cohen maintain that "those who have studied Rawls' work, and even more, those who knew him personally, are aware of a deeply religious temperament that informed his life and writings." (Cohen and Nagel 2009, 5). In order to grasp this religious temperament and how religions and religious beliefs matters to Rawls, Cohen and Nagel argue, should be enough to remark that Rawls' theory of justice, broadly understood, is an attempt to achieve political legitimacy "despite religious conflict" (*ibid.*, 6).

So when does a conception of justice have a religious aspect? According to Weithman, in order to state that a view has a religious aspect, a religiosity condition has to be satisfied:

What gives a view a religious aspect is that it has a conception of the world as a whole that presents it as in certain respects holy, or as having a value to which the proper human response is devotion and reverence and to which the everyday values of secular life are subordinate (Weithman 2016, 221).

A few pages later, Weithman contends that justice as fairness satisfies the religiosity condition. In fact, he writes:

Justice as fairness has a conception of the world as a whole in which the principles of justice have a dominant place and, because of the dominant place of the principles of justice, that conception presents the world as worthy of devotion and reverence to which the pursuit of the everyday values of secular life should be subordinate (*ibid.*, 230).

Rawls's view has a religious aspect because of "the dominant place he gives the principles of right in working out a conception of the world as a whole" (*ibid.*, 236).

Weithman's analysis of Rawls' work continues by saying that for Rawls, individuals can express their nature as reasonable and rational beings only by acting according to the principles of justice. Furthermore, the original position appears as the standpoint from which individuals apprehend "as worth of devotion and respect" (*ibid.*, 234) the world as a whole. Furthermore, Weithman argues that the religiosity of justice as fairness is preserved after the so called Rawlsian 'political' turn, namely when Rawls tries to work out a conception of justice freestanding from moral and religious comprehensive outlooks.

All the details of Rawls's work and the deepness of the analysis conducted by Weithman must be overlooked because they are beyond the scope of the present paper. However, what has been said up to now is enough to stress some vagueness in the discourse on the religious aspect of justice as fairness and, more generally, in Rawlsian liberal theory.

If one accepts that justice as fairness satisfies the religiosity condition, one has to accept as well that "Rawls, like Kant, attaches a transcendent or superordinate importance to the ideal of the well-ordered society and to the principles of right he uses to conceive it" (*ibid.*, 236). In fact, Rawls maintain that those principles should be treated as "regulative" and "superordinate" to our other activities, interests, goals.

My critical point towards Weithman's account consists in observing that, if one accepts the discourse on the religiosity condition and on the religious aspect of a political theory, all the theories can have a religious aspect. Consider, for instance, a Marxist, a Libertarian and an advocate of utilitarianism. In analogy with what has been said about Rawls, for all these theorists as well, we could state something like this:

A Marxist attaches a transcendent or superordinate importance to the ideal of the society without social classes and to the communist principles he uses to conceive it, for he argues that we are to treat the principles as regulative and so as superordinate to our other pursuits.

A Libertarian attaches a transcendent or superordinate importance to the ideal of the society governed by libertarian principles and to the libertarian principles he uses to conceive it, for he argues that we are to treat the principles as regulative and so as superordinate to our other pursuits.

A Utilitarian attaches a transcendent or superordinate importance to the ideal of the utilitarian society and to the utilitarian principles he uses to conceive it, for he argues that we are to treat the principles as regulative and so as superordinate to our other pursuits.

This means that Marxists, Libertarians, and Utilitarians, but you can think of other theories as well (such as multiculturalism, feminism, post-colonialism and so on and so forth) can have a religious aspect. In other words, since the religiosity condition is too vague and easy to satisfy, all the political theories can ultimately be religious. We might end up having religion everywhere.

According to me, this situation is not dangerous or despicable in itself. The troubles come when we consider that, if religion is everywhere, we run the risk of having justice as the handmaiden of religion. As stated in the previous pages, when religion is the handmaiden of liberal justice liberal pluralism and freedom of association can be trumped by the imperialistic character of liberal

justice. Similarly, if religion is everywhere and all the theories can be religious, liberal pluralism is jeopardized. For what would happen to those perspectives (whose presence can be expected in an open liberal society) that eschew any consideration of the meaning of the world as a whole? In other words, what would happen to non-religious perspectives? Would they face some unaffordable problems when religion permeates all the theories and all the aspect of social life?

Thus, one can argue that both a<sub>1</sub>) and b<sub>1</sub>) have problems with the acceptance of pluralism and that this is a serious concern for all those theorists who want to work within a Rawlsian philosophical perspective.

### III

To conclude, I would like to spend some words on a clarification and on an undefended assumption. Let us start with the clarification. As the reader could have understood, I did not argue on the plausibility of a<sub>2</sub>) and b<sub>2</sub>). I only showed some problems one has to see in a<sub>1</sub>) and b<sub>1</sub>). These issues mainly concern the acceptance of moral and political pluralism. The underlying thought is that the troubles we found in a<sub>1</sub>) and b<sub>1</sub>) are an invitation to work on a<sub>2</sub>) and b<sub>2</sub>), namely on a more diversity friendly liberalism that dispenses with the imperialistic presence of religion in all the theories and in all the dimensions of individual and collective life.

Then, and with this consideration I pass to expose the undefended assumption, in this paper I assume that religion and politics are two different, although somehow overlapping, domains of human life that need to be kept separated in the light of the fact of pluralism. This is the main reason why we should accept neither

that religion is the handmaiden of justice nor that justice is the handmaiden of religion.

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