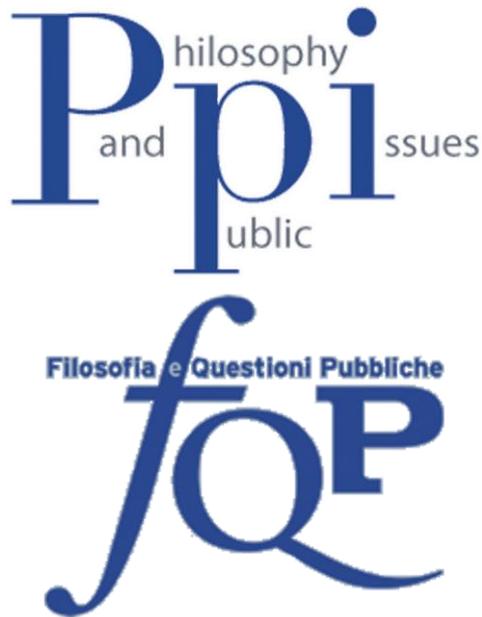


SYMPOSIUM  
LIBERAL LEGITIMACY, PUBLIC REASON AND  
CITIZENS OF FAITH



POLITICAL LIBERALISM AS A  
POLITICAL THEOLOGY?  
A POSTCOLONIAL APPENDIX TO PAUL  
WEITHMAN'S *RAWLS, POLITICAL  
LIBERALISM AND REASONABLE FAITH*

BY  
AAKASH SINGH RATHORE

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# Political Liberalism as a Political Theology?

## A Postcolonial Appendix to Paul Weithman's *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*

Aakash Singh Rathore

### The Postcolonial Backdrop

**T**he practice of political theory in the post-colonies has been inseparable from suspicion against the liberal thought that gave rise to the very institutions that made the practice possible. In India in particular, postcolonial theory has occupied itself with the task of excavating and illustrating the myriad ways that liberal institutions and thinkers persistently leveraged liberal cultural, social, and political ideas to justify and entrench colonial rule, the establishment of the modern university system serving as no minor example of the insidious process.

Uday Singh Mehta's *Liberalism and Empire* is a classic example of the systematic expression of this suspicion (Mehta 1999). Contrary to the ahistorical decoupling of liberalism from its early imperialist bent that is characteristic of Anglo-American political philosophy, Mehta tirelessly directs and redirects us to the intimate relationship between liberalism and empire. A key and of course highly controversial claim of this position is the suggestion

that the urge toward empire is implicit – tacit, perhaps inchoate, but nevertheless implicit – somehow and somewhere within the basic architecture of liberal thought. In the case of British imperialism, this urge was fully manifest and even explicit. It took form in terms of doctrines and practices that insensitively wreaked havoc upon “barbaric” or “traditional” cultures, dismissive of their unfamiliar peculiarities, steamrolling over them with its universalist convictions supposedly free of particularity, grounded as they were in objective rationality rather than merely subjective interests.

Obviously, no liberal theorist today condones imperialism, irrespective of the actual practices of self-styled liberal governments or liberal international institutions. A liberal-oriented political theorist working in the post-colonies, then, understands herself as unburdened by the requirement to justify liberal theory’s inherent contradictions, as would have been the case prior to the era of global decolonization, i.e., the centuries-long epoch of comprehensive rather than political liberalism. She remains merely tasked with the much lighter obligation of pointing out the obvious: that the actual neo-imperialistic practices of self-styled liberal regimes and institutions contravene the basic principles of the theory. And naturally this gets supplemented by addressing the weaknesses of the controversial claim of postcolonial theory that something deeply flawed within the theory inevitably manifests itself within the practices. The latter line of argumentation usually delves into the historical differences between comprehensive and political liberalism, muses on the Hegelian provenance of the Marxist – i.e., fundamentally anti-liberal – dictum that a theory must be judged according to its realization(s) in practice, with forays into a political as opposed to a metaphysical conception, an ideal versus non-ideal theory, the right versus the good, and so on.

Paul Weithman's lucid and compelling recent book in the tradition of political liberalism, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, spends a good deal of time touching upon several of these same themes (especially in its Part II and Part III), although his motives are far removed from those of the political theorist in the post-colonies. But what is most pertinent to the latter, rather, are the arguments put forward by Weithman in opening and concluding his work (that is, in his Part I and Part IV).

This is because Weithman bookends his text with exploratory essays on the possible religious "aspects" of liberalism. To be sure, this is not on the religious aspects of classical or comprehensive liberalism – that much maligned correlation of liberal imperialism with Christian missionary zeal, responsible for so much bloodshed and ethnocide in the name of civilizing backwards peoples and saving heathen souls. That classical correlation, responsible for much of the continued suspicion mentioned in opening, has been regretted by liberal theorists, condemned by liberal institutions, and unanimously disavowed and denounced. And yet, anti-liberal skeptics in the post-colonies continue to argue that the linkage between Christianity and liberalism was not merely a historical accident, one now corrected in, and its dangers diffused by, political liberalism. Rather, according to these postcolonial political theorists, Christian thought and values are implicit – tacit, perhaps inchoate, but nevertheless implicit – somehow and somewhere within the basic architecture of political liberalism too. What Paul Weithman's book unintentionally serves to do, is to make this manifest and even explicit.

## **The Postsecular Backdrop**

Of course, Weithman's concern with the possible religious aspect of political liberalism does not arise in a vacuum. During the last few decades (over the course of which the essays in Weithman's book were composed), the formerly dominant status of the secularist paradigm has been undermined globally. Since the 1980s and early 1990s when sociologists began publishing their crucial work on the issues of 'public religion' (Casanova 1994) and the 'desecularization' of the political arena (Weigel and Berger 1999), it has become increasingly apparent that the post-Enlightenment secular paradigm which dominated the discourse of the social sciences during the twentieth century has faced fundamental challenges. The complex movements that accompanied the evolution of globalization have also demonstrated that it is indispensable to understand and analyse how religion plays a role within the political reality of contemporary societies. The 'clash of civilizations' thesis of Samuel Huntington (1998) provoked intensive debates and positioned religion as the central factor of the current political context. In effect, consequent upon these developments, what in Jürgen Habermas' scholarship is referred to as a 'postsecular turn' seems to be occurring within the political sciences more broadly.

Furthermore, these developments shed new light on the works of philosophers who had dealt with religious issues during the second part of the last century, and – in contrast with the secular and atheistic tendencies of modern philosophy – has rendered the question of religion a crucial topic for philosophy. Negligence of the problems concerning religion, including taking for granted the universal applicability of the secular paradigm in political theory, had in earlier decades led to researchers who were concerned with 'the religious' and its influence on the political being placed in an embarrassing position – well summarized through the imagery

evoked in Richard Rorty's expression 'conversation stopper' (1994). Finally, however, the more or less marginalized or isolated debates of theologians and other experts on the question of inter-religious dialogue and other theological issues – such as political theology – continue to garner ever-wider general interest.

All of this landscape is also extremely varying. Some celebrate the return of religion from its 'Westphalian exile' (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003) while others argue for the thesis of an uneven, though persistent, secularizing process (Norris and Inglehart 2004). Habermas' "postsecular turn" generated an especially intensive reaction by a community of post-Enlightenment scholars who seemed to be betrayed by their leader. Charles Taylor (2007), for his part, speaks of the possibility of (re)conversion within a critically self-reflective modernity. Hans-Joachim Höhn (2007) elaborates a theory of religious dispersion in modern culture and speaks about the ambivalence of secularization. The Indian social anthropologist T. N. Madan (1997) denies that secularism ever could have been the only alternative for building societies in the contemporary global context and defends the idea of a "participatory pluralism" (Madan 2006, 133). Another well-known political psychologist in India, Ashis Nandy (2003), vividly and categorically expressed his skepticism about the secular and the modern agendas, having written his anti-secular manifesto much earlier than Western scholarship would begin to embrace the idea of a "new religious pluralism" or "radical pluralism." Tariq Ramadan (2004) seeks the principles and ways of the formation of "a European and American Islamic culture" (Ramadan 2004, 216), while others, alternatively, attempt to represent Islam as the 'other' of modern Western secular culture, the uniqueness and dignity of which would consist in its "a-secular" character (Majid 2004). In the United States, both in scholarship and in democratic political life, the "religious factor" continues to retain its vital role.

We can, then, quite clearly see that the political influence and adaptation of traditional and new forms of religious consciousness is a widespread phenomenon. However, this general religious impact on the political is to be differentiated from the question of how the insights derivable from different religious outlooks could be – or, alternatively, why they perhaps should not be – introduced into the public life of democracies, on the one hand, and within the purview of political theory, on the other.

### **The Political-Theological Backdrop**

This latter question has been taken up saliently and in depth within the work of Juergen Habermas, for whom the postsecular environment has long been haunted by the ominous notion of political theology.

Habermas' attempt to harness the “inspiring energy” potential of religious traditions into a political-theoretical framework occurs within the backdrop of political theology, which seems to him to threaten the fundamental rationality and freedoms of modernity. In his account, the secular should assimilate the religious like a blood infusion, becoming more vibrant and stronger, but not losing its hard-won advantage:

We cannot at any rate exclude the thought that [religious tradition]...unleashes an inspiring energy for all of society....In short, postmetaphysical thought is prepared to learn from religion, but remains agnostic in the process. It insists on the difference between the certainties of faith, on the one hand, and validity claims that can be publicly criticized, on the other... (17)

The postsecular problem thus lies in how best to preserve the secular democratic institutions and keep them from being violated through religiously motivated politics:

Religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life. In the event of the corresponding political debates, this potential makes religious speech a serious candidate to transporting possible truth contents, which can then be translated from the vocabulary of a particular religious community into a generally accessible language. However, the institutional thresholds between the ‘wild life’ of the political public sphere and the formal proceedings within political bodies are also a filter that from the Babel of voices in the informal flows of public communication allows only secular contributions to pass through. In parliament, for example, the standing rules of procedure of the house must empower the house leader to have religious statements or justifications expunged from the minutes. (10)

This rich paragraph is replete with suggestion but I will just draw out a couple. First, that translation from particular (i.e. the language of religion) to general (i.e. secular language) serves the threshold protecting institutions like parliament from the public Babel exterior to it; second, that the leader of the house in parliament should be empowered to expunge religious language from the minutes.

This mention of the exclusionary threshold occurs within the wider context of Habermas’ arguably inclusionary notion of the linguistification of the sacred. There is a vast amount of secondary literature on Habermas’ idea of ‘linguistification’<sup>1</sup> and its

<sup>1</sup> The central idea of ‘linguistification of the sacred’ first takes shape in: J. Habermas (1989) *The Theory of Communicative Action: Lifeworld and System*. Vol. II (Boston: Beacon Press), 77-111. Among the secondary literature, see: Lewis Edwin Hahn (ed.) (2000), *Perspectives on Habermas* (London: Opencourt), and

evolution into ‘translation’ in the postsecular writings,<sup>2</sup> and a debate rages as to whether Habermas’ basic position on this has changed or not. While we cannot delve into the substantive issues surrounding ‘linguistification’ or ‘translation’ here, we must mention a point which will be of relevance to the line of argumentation pursued below. Many critics of Habermas (and of Rawls, whose “proviso” has a similar framework in this respect<sup>3</sup>) have pointed to an unfair burden on religious persons, who, when they enter the political public sphere, are required to translate their reasons and justifications into a secular discourse. Habermas has made remarks which would seem to show that this burden is not as asymmetrical as it would at first seem. For, he does not think that “we, as Europeans, can seriously understand concepts like morality and ethical life, persona and individuality, or freedom and emancipation, without appropriating the substance of the Judeo-Christian understanding of history in terms of salvation” (1994: 15).

Stop for a moment to think about the significance of this claim. Does this sober rendition of the kernel of Carl Schmitt’s political theology (to wit: “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts” (2006) — does this really lighten the burden of religious people, or does it rather

Austin Harrington (2007), “Habermas’s Theological Turn?”, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 37: 45–61 and the references therein.

<sup>2</sup> See, A. Harrington (2007), “Habermas and the ‘Post-Secular Society.’” *European Journal of Social Theory* 10, 543-560; N. Adams (2006) *Habermas and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); H. Joas (2004) “Religion postsäkular? Zu einer Begriffsprägung von Jürgen Habermas,” in his *Braucht der Mensch Religion?* (Freiburg: Herder) 122-128; and, H.-J. Hohn (2007) *Postsäkular. Gesellschaft im Umbruch – Religion im Wandel* (Paderborn: Schöningh).

<sup>3</sup> The Rawlsian proviso is discussed by Weithman primarily in Part III of his work.

shift that burden from off of some religious groups and place it on to others, namely, onto those from a non-Judeo-Christian religious background?

And the problematic nature of Habermas' "We...Europeans"<sup>4</sup> also refracts through the second point, where Habermas provides the Speaker of parliament with a rather unprecedented power: to expunge religious statement from the minutes, in case that threshold filtration or prophylactic were compromised during parliamentary discourse, with a religious seed planted in the minds of the debaters. This bears far-reaching impact, as granting the Speaker the power to abort that religious seed necessarily precludes plural legal systems such as those operative in India or Israel, as discussed further below

Finally, the paragraph cited also evokes Habermas' ostensibly reconciliatory gesture of situating himself as a mean between two extremes of the wider secularism debate. On the one side, Habermas criticizes John Rawls because he finds that Rawls' logic excludes too rigorously the religious, not allowing it to be infused into the blood of the body politic. This reading of Rawls of course recapitulates one of the fundamental disagreements articulated in the Habermas-Rawls debate, treating of the dilation/contraction of the political public sphere.<sup>5</sup> Rawls seems to contract what Habermas hopes to dilate.

On the other extreme, Habermas criticizes Nicholas Wolterstorff, who errs on the side of excess as much as Rawls

<sup>4</sup> See Bill Martin's chapter entitled "Eurocentrically Distorted Communication" for a further range of problems arising from Habermas' focus on what I have epitomized through Habermas' phrase, "we...Europeans," in: Lewis Edwin Hahn (ed.) (2000) *Perspectives on Habermas* (London: Opencourt), 411-420.

<sup>5</sup> For this debate, see *The Journal of Philosophy* 92 (March 1995), and Rawls' subsequent reply.

errs on the side of miserliness. According to Habermas, Wolterstorff would overrun the political by the religious, thus violating vulnerable democratic institutions like the parliament:

Since no institutional filter is envisaged between the state and the public domain, this version does not exclude the possibility that policies and legal programs will be implemented solely on the basis of the religious or confessional beliefs of a ruling majority. This is the conclusion explicitly drawn by Nicholas Wolterstorff, who does not wish to subject the political use of religious reasons to any restraints whatsoever. At any rate, he allows for a political legislature making use of religious arguments. If one thus opens the parliaments to the battle on religious beliefs, governmental authority can evidently become the agent of a religious majority that asserts its will and thus violates the democratic procedure. (11).

Habermas' institutional filter which protects the parliament from its violation allows the state to preserve its earlier legitimacy – and preserve state sovereignty – while opening it to the life-affirming but politically destabilizing domain of religious vitality. It seems that everything would hang upon the effectiveness of the institutional filter. How to let religious values into the political public sphere without impregnating democracy with the bastard child that goes by the name: political theology. Habermas' long-standing implicit preoccupation with political theology became explicit in late 2009, when he gave a talk in New York entitled, "The Political: The Rational Sense of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology."<sup>6</sup>

Political theology is dubious; religion is powerful — New York's Twin Towers stand, or do not stand, as a painful reminder of these facts. This is why Habermas requires the postsecular to

<sup>6</sup> Available at: <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2009/11/02/rethinking-secularism-audio/>

be realized wholly upon the terms set by the secular. We open ourselves to the religious in good faith and wish not to be violated. Europe, as it is, is already suffering under pains of contraction and miscarriage, and thus vulnerable, according to Habermas. For, as he describes in the closing paragraph of his “A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe”:

Each of the great European nations has experienced the bloom of its imperial power. And...each has had to work through the experience of the loss of its empire...with the loss of colonial territories. With the growing distance of imperial domination and the history of colonialism, the European powers also...could learn from the perspective of the defeated to perceive themselves in the dubious role of victors who are called to account for the violence of a forcible and uprooting process of modernization. (2003).

Habermas’ watershed essay *Religion in the Public Sphere* was also partly inspired by the fact that, to quote from his opening page, “In several Muslim countries, and in Israel as well, religious family law is either an alternative or a substitute for secular civil law.” It is of course intriguing to try to reason out how Habermas envisioned parliamentary and legislative debate surrounding the framing and adopting of such laws, considering that religious statements and justifications should be expunged from the minutes. As adumbrated above, how could the Israeli *Knesset*, the Indian *Lok Sabha* or the Pakistani *Majlis-e-Shoora* – just to take a few examples of countries with plural legal systems – possibly function under the constant erasure of religious statements?

Of course, for Habermas, India and Pakistan fall outside the scope of his (post)secular dialectics:

A ‘postsecular’ society must at some point have been in a ‘secular’ state. The controversial term can therefore only be applied to the affluent societies of Europe or countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where people’s religious ties have steadily or rather quite dramatically lapsed in the post-War period. (11)

This exclusion of South Asia does not prevent Habermas from speaking of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam over a dozen times in this same essay, nor does it dissuade him from opening his 2009 talk on Political Theology in New York with pithy remarks on China.<sup>7</sup> But why even speak of phenomena in these areas if by definition they do not bear on the theme under consideration: postsecular societies? It is a vexing question as to why so much of the evidence of the resurgence of religion, which characterizes the postsecular condition Habermas apprehends, is drawn from regions lying outside the ‘affluent societies of Europe’ — it cannot be that Europe may develop into a postsecular society because Israel, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, China, Russia, and other outliers fail to fit the framework of the secular paradigm; that is a *non sequitur*.

### **The Political Theology of Political Liberalism**

Liberal postsecularism (under which heading we may uncomfortably group together Rawls and Habermas) is a far cry from orthodox political theology; that is, from the Schmittian dogma claiming an irreducible and fundamental theological background for the most significant juridico-political concepts of the modern state. Quite the contrary, it aims rather to separate religion and democracy as far as possible, or at least to outline the

<sup>7</sup> Minute 13, SSRC website – 22 October 2009. He moves on from China to the September 11 attacks, then to Bush and Afghanistan.

parameters for their peaceful coexistence. The renewed visibility of religion has illustrated the inability of secular reason to vanquish religion to the realm of superstition. But this is not even what political liberalism seeks: secular reason ought not to entail any such aspiration; that would be tantamount to thickening thin and minimal liberal reason (articulated in terms of a minimalistic anthropology, discussed further below) with a comprehensive content.

Since the liberal postsecular viewpoint must remain agnostic with respect to religion, political liberalism has no option but to determine and articulate the rules of cohabitation, rules of translation, between public or political reason and private religious views. But is there, then, no political theology of political liberalism? This has been the staple position of political liberals for the most part. With the appearance of Weithman's book, however, the thin edge of the wedge has been introduced.

Let's take a brief look at a concept of particularly rich theological significance to gain a very different perspective on this. Rawls, to state the obvious, has never been regarded as having made a contribution to the understanding of human evil. Indeed, to the contrary, Rawls himself has written: "Accounts of human nature we put aside and rely on a political conception of persons as citizens instead" (800). Following the mainstream literature, we can call this a typical Rawlsian thin conception: the political (as opposed to metaphysical) idea of human nature. By this political conception is understood what is an abstraction from the typical characteristics of a person as incarnate. Instead, Rawls provides a minimalistic account of human nature, or the political nature of humans:

We think of persons as reasonable and rational, as free and equal citizens, with the two moral powers [– the capacity for a conception of justice and

the capacity for a conception of the good –] and having, at any given moment, a determinate conception of the good, which may change over time. (*ibid.*)

This conception has become the mainstay of political liberalism. Charles Larmore puts it thus: liberalism is “strictly a political doctrine and not a general ‘philosophy of man,’ not a ‘comprehensive moral ideal’” (2009: 354). However, political liberalism “relies on our being able to abandon ‘the cult of wholeness’ and to embrace a certain differentiation between our role as citizens, free of status and ascription, and our other roles where we may be engaged with others in the pursuit of substantial ideals of the good life.” Thus, Larmore admits that there is some sense in speaking of a “liberal conception of the person” (2009: 351).

Within this account of the person, however, there could be no mention of evil, not even a hint – it is, after all, a political and not theological conception of the person. What is interesting, though, is that the earlier we go back in Rawls’ thought, the more prominent are the theological motifs to be found within his representation of human nature, at least with respect to a robust conception of evil. There is a surprising but neglected passage from the end of *A Theory of Justice* on the distinctions between the unjust, the bad, and the evil man. Rawls states there, “what moves the evil man is the love of injustice: he delights in the impotence and humiliation of those subject to him and he relishes being recognized by them as the willful author of their degradation” (386). This discussion is not unique in Rawls’ writings – at least, not in his early writings. In his senior thesis from 1942, entitled *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith* (which Weithman covers in Part I of his book), the term “evil” appears no less than 76 times. From the 11 appearances of the word “evil” in *A Theory of Justice*, we go down to only 4 in his later work *Political Liberalism*.

In the latter, Rawls mentions “evil” twice in speaking of American slavery and the Civil War, which resulted in the death and destruction of many lives in the young nation, and then twice in speaking of Hitler and the Shoah. Finally, in his last book, *The Law of Peoples*, we find only 3 appearances of the term: with reference to the Holocaust, the Luftwaffe of the Third Reich, and Jewish ghettos in the 16th century.

It appears, then, that in Rawls’ later works, evil is seen as radical, a thing of the past and a shadow cast upon our hope. However, we have no justification for being without hope. This is because the idea of evil, so prominent in early Rawls, has totally disappeared from the scene as a historical moment of no contemporary consequence in relation to his discovery of the minimalistic, political conception of the person as citizen – that is, as being fully reasonable and rational rather than tending toward the misdeeds consistent with the earlier theological representation of his nature.

This is important in relation to the claim of the free standing position of political liberalism, and its disavowal of all controversial metaphysical dogma. Rawls sought to “apply the principle of toleration to philosophy itself: the public conception of justice is to be political, not metaphysical.” This “tries to draw solely upon basic intuitive ideas that are embedded in the political institutions of a constitutional democratic regime and the public traditions of their interpretation.” It should, in short, more or less without question be free of a religious aspect.

And yet Weithman, in averring the opposite in the final chapter of his book, seems to touch upon something hard to deny. Indeed, it might be right there for everyone to see in the genealogy of political liberalism that Rawls himself provides in the introduction of *Political Liberalism*. There, Rawls sketches the

historical origins of the main contours of political liberalism right back to the Reformation period:

the success of liberal constitutionalism came as a discovery of a new social possibility: the possibility of a reasonably harmonious and stable pluralist society. Before the successful and peaceful practice of toleration in societies with liberal institutions there was no way of knowing of that possibility. It is more natural to believe, as the centuries-long practice of intolerance appeared to confirm, that social unity and concord requires agreement on a general and comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine. Intolerance was accepted as a condition of social order and stability. (1985: 223-4).

As Jakob De Roover has argued in this context, the ignorance Rawls displays here of the numerous historical non-Western traditions of “harmonious and stable pluralist societ[ies]” hints at a supersessionist worldview quite characteristic of Christian political theology:

The Indian subcontinent is called “the world’s oldest and most interesting ‘living laboratory’ of religious pluralism”: a variety of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions co-existed with Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Parsis from the end of the eighth century CE. This diversity also included streams of thought that denied the existence of any deities (citing Coward (1987: xi) and Basham (1969: 264-8; 345-7). Of course, Indian society also knew occasional and sometimes persistent clashes between communities, but systematic persecution and oppression on the basis of comprehensive doctrines was absent. (Jakob De Roover 2015: 211)

De Roover concludes, therefore, that “Rawls’ claim that the success of liberal toleration reflects humanity’s discovery of a ‘new social possibility’ makes sense, *if and only if* all plural societies are variations on the structure of post-Reformation Europe.”

Postcolonial political theorists have long argued that Christian thought and values are implicit somehow and somewhere within the basic architecture of political liberalism. While it was in no way intended – with the the postsecular and especially the postcolonial being topics totally alien to the scope of his book – Paul Weithman’s first and last chapters make the *somehow* explicit. As for the *somewhere*, that *where* is starting to seem like it might be every work of Rawls, from the 1942 Thesis up to the *Law of Peoples*.

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