

Rawls and Religion

TOM BAILEY AND VALENTINA GENTILE, Editors

New York: Columbia University Press, 2015; xiv, 307 pp.; \$30.00 (paper)

doi:10.1017/S0012217315000669

John Rawls and other liberals have always enjoyed an uneasy relationship with religion. Justifying the political order at the tribunal of each person's understanding stands at the core of liberal political philosophy. We look to justify the political order based on public (shareable) reasons in order to respect citizens as free and equal persons. Relying on public reasons becomes a double-edged sword, because in an effort to respect citizens as free and equal, the search for shared reasons may exclude otherwise reasonable religious citizens who share our desire for terms of fair-cooperation, but not the aspiration towards public justification. A crisis of conscience may develop, since it appears that citizens of faith are supposed to 'bracket' or 'set aside' in the public realm their most deeply held beliefs in favour of prioritizing liberal values. In response, Rawls seeks to reach a consensus upon a conception of political authority grounded in an account of mutual respect. Two standard criticisms emerge: first, restrictions on religion are overly demanding; and second, restrictions are insufficiently democratic.

With the collection of essays under review here, Tom Bailey and Valentina Gentile want to reconsider the standard critical reading of Rawls on religion as mistaken. Bailey and Gentile's introduction sets the stage for a radical reinterpretation of Rawls's stance towards religion that displaces the standard, and often abstract, dichotomy between accommodation and exclusion. By rejecting the standard view, many of the contributors seek to demonstrate that Rawls's "'exclusion' of religion is extremely limited and qualified, such that he provides extensive accommodations of religions in political life." (7) What emerges is a novel response to the proliferation of religion that does not rely on strong liberal presuppositions. Instead, what we have is a more contingent and dynamic consensus that does not rely on abstractions, but instead depends on—and engages with—a society's particular moral context.

The first part of the book assesses Rawls's alleged exclusivism, and begins with a bold restatement of standard critical view by Christopher Eberle. Eberle calls into question Rawls's conclusion that only secular (shareable) reasons can provide citizens with due respect. Due respect only requires 'conscientious engagement' (a high level of rational justification), which allows for advocacy based on religious reasons alone. Robert Talisse engages with Eberle's argument for conscientious engagement, and offers a powerful response that relies on what it takes for people to be citizens, and not merely subjects of the law. Citizens are in the business of placing moral demands upon one another, so when we deny the relevance of shared reasons, we fail to treat other citizens as moral agents.

Continuing with the theme of what's required for citizenship, Paul Weithman and Andrew March defend Rawls's qualified inclusivism. March's contribution is the most instructive chapter in this part of the book because it calls for a more fine-grained distinction between permissible and impermissible reasons, which we judge based on the content of the reason(s) and the subject matter of the decision(s). March correctly identifies our concern as not with religious arguments as such, "but with a particular kind of religious argument, namely, arguments that

tend to be justified by reference to a clear scriptural, revealed, or clerical command.” (105) Ultimately, the need to exclude some religious arguments does not stem from the fact that they are religious in nature, but a worry that, without a doctrine of restraint, we may impinge on the “freedom of individuals from arbitrary and external domination.” (122)

The second and third parts of the book turn to issues of accommodation of religion and ‘transcendent’ perspectives of religions themselves. The latter half of the book demonstrates that engaging with Rawls’s framework is more than just an exercise in historiography. Instead, what Rawls left us are normative guidelines that are malleable and mutable. Whether Rawls would agree with something like Peter Jonkers’s appeal to reasonable faith is debatable, but that’s beside the point. What matters, and what makes these contributions valuable, is that they represent new directions for Rawlsians and liberals to pursue in order to deal with the proliferation of religion and other world-views in contemporary societies. Authors like Micah Schwartzman and Johannes van der Ven offer novel amendments to Rawls’s ideal of public reason by emphasizing the role of arguments by conjecture, and the employment of hermeneutical interpretation. An under-appreciated facet of Rawls’s work is the role of deliberation in securing consensus and mutual respect, and what Schwartzman and van der Ven offer are ways to facilitate deliberations amongst a diverse group of citizens, including religious citizens.

Abudllahi An-Na’im’s contribution offers one of the most unique perspectives from the book by looking at the relationship between Rawls and Islamic politics. Most of the literature on Rawls and religion tends to focus on Christianity, as if liberal states were only populated by Christians. An-Na’im addresses “Islamic politics *on its own terms* and *in its own context*” (243), and what’s most striking about his contribution is how compatible Rawlsian liberalism is with Islamic politics. An-Na’im believes the coalescence between the two views breaks down because Rawls sees the “secular and religious ... as mutually exclusive [and] is therefore not a workable solution for Muslims.” (260) However, what many of the other contributors make clear is that the secular and religious *need* to be connected if citizens are to accept a common conception of political authority. The important question becomes precisely *how* to connect the secular and the religious, and many of the contributors to this book offer a number of strategies of how this is possible.

Finally a word on what may seem like a curious omission. Legitimacy is at the forefront of much of the literature on *Political Liberalism*, and since nearly all of the discussions focus on Rawls’s later work, excluding any significant discussion of legitimacy may seem conspicuous. Rather than taking the absence of legitimacy as a potential shortcoming, my suggestion is to view this as one of the book’s virtues. Underlying many of the contributions is a recognition that one of the most powerful tools that Rawls left us was the ideal of public reason. No doubt, if we’re concerned with how it is possible for those affirming a religious doctrine to also support a just democratic regime, legitimacy will be important. However, given the potential disconnect between legitimacy and what religious believers take to be just, public reason is what will help to bridge the gap so that the vast majority of citizens will be able to wholeheartedly and willingly support a just democratic regime.

PHIL SMOLENSKI *Queen’s University*