POLITICAL THEORY

Democratic Religion from Locke to Obama: Faith and the Civic Life of Democracy. By Giorgi Areshidze. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2016. 213p. $29.95
doi:10.1017/S1537592716003406

— Steven B. Smith, *Yale University*

In this short, elegant, and important new book, Giorgi Areshidze examines the justification of religion in contemporary American life. Placing himself somewhere between the secular Left and the religious Right, Areshidze argues that religion still has a vital role to play in resisting democracy's inherent drift toward a kind of apolitical individualism and civic apathy. Religion, especially Christianity, remains for most Americans the most important source of those Tocquevillian virtues of civic engagement—much admired by Robert Putnam and others—that are the core of a healthy democratic culture.

The book takes a somewhat meandering path to reach its conclusion about what religion has to offer. Chapter 1 is devoted to John Rawls's *Political Liberalism* (1993) and its attempt to treat religion as part of his doctrine of "reasonable pluralism." Piggybacking on the benefits of three hundred years of theological liberalization, Rawls's goal is not so much to undermine or subvert religion but to sideline it for political purposes. This strategy remains markedly different from that of Richard Rorty's more aggressive approach that encourages not just the neutralization of religion but the actual withering away of religious belief that he believes is the precondition for a more robustly secular democracy. The difference between Rawls and Rorty is the difference between the moderate and the radical version of Enlightenment. The one favors a society based on pluralism and toleration; the other desires a secularized mono-culture.

Chapter 2 focuses on then-candidate Barack Obama's treatment of religion in his campaign book *The Audacity of Hope* (2006). In a highly sensitive reading of the text, Areshidze shows how Obama's treatment fluctuates between his admiration for the importance of religion as advancing the cause of social justice in the abolitionist and the Civil Rights movements and his Rawlsian desire to reconcile faith with the needs of a modern pluralistic democracy. This is probably the place in which many people find themselves. Obama has probably thought more deeply about this problem than any other recent figure on the public stage. The fact that Areshidze can put him in the same company with figures like Rawls, Lincoln, and Tocqueville is itself a considerable testimony.

Chapter 3 returns to the fount of modern theories of toleration and secularism in John Locke's *A Letter on Toleration*. Our very ambivalence on this topic is rooted in Locke's equivocal and shifting positions on toleration. Is toleration a requirement of true religion based on the sanctity of individual conscience or is it the outcome of an epistemological skepticism that denies our ability to comprehend the true faith? This tension still pervades our political life today. The difference concerns whether we think of America as a Christian nation or a nation where Christianity is simply one, albeit the largest, faith among many, including the faith of nonbelievers.

The best chapter is devoted to Lincoln's version of political religion in his Second Inaugural Address. Lincoln's speech turned the Civil War into a test of God's providence and our inability to fathom God's intentions. This chapter is followed by one devoted to the theology of Martin Luther King, Jr., and his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Areshidze seems to enjoy the *Schadenfreude* over Rawls's somewhat embarrassed effort to square Lincoln's Second Inaugural—the greatest speech ever given by an American—with the requirements of public reason. Rawls's public reason is itself a philosophical expression of Locke's "reasonable" Christianity. It is Lockeanism come of age. It is not clear that this kind of religion is sufficient to make sense of the sacrifice of heroes who gave their lives in the struggle to advance the cause of human equality.

The final chapter is devoted to contrasting the competing visions of Jürgen Habermas and Tocqueville on the place of religion in the modern democratic state. For the nonspecialist, Areshidze supplies a useful overview of Habermas's transformation from an early proponent of "communicative rationality" to a deeper awareness of the voice of religion in the public sphere. In his debate with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—later Pope Benedict XVI—Habermas had to admit the failure of the Enlightenment's hopes for the complete secularization of society. Tocqueville emerges as the hero of the book. Unlike Habermas, Tocqueville regarded religion not simply as accommodating the failure of the Enlightenment but as addressing a deeper need of human nature that the Enlightenment overlooked. Not only did he stress the Puritan foundations of American democracy, but he also saw religion as something like a permanent human need. Like Pascal, he feared the existential loneliness of an individual cast adrift in the vast, infinite space of the universe, cut off from grace and the communion with others.

The conclusion of the book treats Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell's recent *American Grace* (2010) as providing empirical support for the view that religion remains uniquely the source of democracy's "social capital," while deploring the moral absolutism bordering on intolerance that often comes with strong religious faith. How, then, to square this circle about admitting the importance of religious conviction and defending a culture of toleration and inclusivity? Areshidze's not surprising answer is that there must a kind of trade-off between the

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592716003406 Published online by Cambridge University Press

two and that we must accept religion with "a certain degree of [its] moral inflexibility" if we are to retain a flourishing democracy.

Democratic Religion from Locke to Obama raises a powerful and enduring question. That question was raised a generation ago by political theorists like William Galston, Rogers Smith, and Stephen Macedo. Does liberal democracy have the internal resources necessary to produce those virtues of mind and heart that are required for the flourishing of a democratic way of life? For too long, the official theory of liberalism was that the state must remain officially "neutral" to the ways of life of its citizens. Ways of life or "comprehensive" doctrines are inherently controversial, and there is no way of deciding between them. The liberal state should restrict itself to being a neutral arbiter over disputes regarding the best way of life, presiding benignly over them and intervening only to prevent conflicts or to prevent any one way of life from tyrannizing over the others.

This form of neutralist liberalism has come to seem increasingly inadequate when accounting for the persistence of religious faith. This faith cannot be reduced to a lifestyle or a distinct domain of culture. As many of the most profound students of democracy have come to appreciate, our most cherished virtues—equality, liberty, tolerance, and respect for the dignity of the individual—have their source in the religious tradition. Samuel Moyne has recently argued, with some overstatement, that our very discourse about human rights is indebted to the role of certain Catholic and Protestant theologians in the years following World War II. Those who ask us to be neutral to religion express indifference to the source of the very virtues that make democracy possible. Like F. Scott Fitzgerald's Tom and Daisy Buchanan, such people are careless of their possessions and would fritter away their own moral inheritance, leaving it to others to clean up their messes.

Truth Commissions: Memory, Power, and Legitimacy. By Onur Bakiner. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 328p. $65.00

doi:10.1017/S1537592716003418

— Mihaela Mihai, *University of Edinburgh*

This well-researched book deals with a timely question: How can we understand the impact that truth commissions have in postconflict societies? Sparked by the exemplary experience of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission—an institutional experiment that continues to polarize political and academic debates—there has been intense political and academic interest in these postconflict mechanisms. Set up to excavate truths from under thick layers of denial, commissions are essentially political sites where processes of contestation over alternative versions of the past unfold. Onur Bakiner enters these debates and sets himself an ambitious goal: overcoming, on the one hand, naive idealizations about these institutions' capacity to secure healing for victims and general, social reconciliation, and, on the other hand, cynicism about their being simply pawns in the hands of reactionary elites. He proposes to offer a well-calibrated assessment of truth commissions' success in securing their goals, arguing that they are "neither fully subversive, nor fully docile" (p. 4).

Through a mix of theoretical reflection and the analysis of 15 case studies, Bakiner argues that in spite of often being the result of transitional compromises, truth commissions have surprised their various audiences. In some cases, they delegitimized the very political forces that sponsored their creation, successfully navigating the field of power that trapped them between the state and various civil-society forces. However, far from uncritically celebrating the upsets made possible by these commissions' constrained discretion, Bakiner acknowledges that, overall, their impact has been modest. Given that truth commissions have always operated under difficult political, economic, and cultural circumstances, they have had a mixed record, both in terms of having their reports *directly* translated into policy and *indirectly*, by enabling and responding to sustained pressures by civil-society groups.

Though not introduced as such, two related factors appear to overwhelmingly influence impact, according to Bakiner. The first is the commission creation process. The setup of the commission involves decisions about the mandate, including the composition of the commission, its remit (which crimes and violations are to be investigated), and the time period covered, as well as the definition of its juridical powers (subpoena, amnesty, etc.). All these determine the position that these institutions will adopt in striking a balance between existing memory tropes and potential new ones, between limited forensic understandings of truth and complex accounts of the structural roots of violence, and between elite pressures and demands by victims' associations.

The second—related—factor that conditions impact is the level of societal support for the institution of the commission. Truth commissions that enjoy stability and public endorsement can venture to adjudicate between contending social memories. They can also offer a platform for opposing voices to be heard publicly, and can even change the terms of the debate by incorporating new concepts and explanations—the "right to truth" being the most obvious example. Other times, recognizing their institutional fragility and the divisiveness of the issues at stake, commissions explicitly avoid taking sides, omitting from their reports thorny issues that are likely to trigger spirals of violence.

In order to substantiate these claims, Bakiner discusses no fewer than 15 truth commissions. First, the Peruvian and the Chilean commissions are juxtaposed and analyzed

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