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# The Politics of Religion and Language: Similar or Different?

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In the three decades following World War II, the Western industrial democracies seemed to be moving along the same track. Status was giving way to contract, achievement was replacing ascription, and religion was being privatized. In the process, the old “grounds for difference”—class, race, and religion—were being swept away. Or so the modernization theorists assured us.

By the late 1970s, their prophecies had begun to ring hollow. The core tenets of modernization theory would be toppled one by one over the next three decades. First came the much-heralded resurgence of public religion (Casanova 1994). Milestones included the Iranian Revolution, the Moral Majority, Liberation Theology, and Poland’s Solidarity. Then came the end of post–World War II “income compression” and the return of income inequality (Levinson 2016). There was no shortage of Cassandras—or of Chicago boys to spit in their mouths. But with the financial crisis and the Occupy Movement, talk of class and socialism came roaring back. Meanwhile, biotech startups from Kendall Square to Silicon Valley were busy bringing modern genetics to market. They fed prophets of “transhumanism” and “the singularity.”

What does all of this mean? In his latest book, Rogers Brubaker assesses the implications for social inequality in the new millennium. The “contemporary politics of difference,” he argues, results from three unanticipated developments: “the return of inequality, the return of biology, and the return of the sacred” (Brubaker 2015: 2). In this review essay, I will focus mainly on the third leg of Brubaker’s tripod: religion. Why has it become a source of difference and therefore of conflict in recent decades, he asks?

Brubaker develops his answer in a surprising way, namely, using a comparison between religion and language. If we could understand the difference between the two, he reasons, we might understand why the politics of language has faded while the politics of religion has resurged. In some ways, he says, language and religion are similar: “Both ... are ways of identifying oneself and others.... Both divide the world ... into bounded and largely self-reproducing communities. And claims are made in the name of both ... for recognition, resources, and reproduction” (ibid: 5).

In other ways though, says Brubaker, they are quite different: “Language is a medium of communication and a symbol of identity; it is not a structure of authority. But religion often involves an authoritative, binding, and comprehensive set of norms” (ibid). Further, while linguistic difference is typically generated exogenously (e.g., through conquest or colonization), “religious pluralism is also generated from within” (e.g., through heterodoxy and schism) (ibid: 91). Finally, religion is more elusive than language. “We know what we are talking about when we talk about language, but the same cannot be said for religion” (ibid: 89). On balance, Brubaker implies, the differences outnumber the similarities.

The politics that arise around language and religion are also similar and different. Similar, insofar as: “Language or religion or both together are central to most ethnic and national identifications, and they frequently serve as key emblems or symbols of

such identifications” (ibid: 5). But also different in that: “Public life can in principle be areligious” (ibid: 89). By contrast, we cannot imagine a public sphere without language. Hence, “[T]he state can approach neutrality with respect to religion,... but it cannot even approach neutrality with respect to language” (ibid: 90). In other words, we can imagine a secular state but not an aphasic one.

Far from resolving the puzzling return of public religion, however, Brubaker’s compare-and-contrast exercise seems to deepen it. On his reading, after all, language cannot be removed from politics, while religion can. And yet language has been depoliticized while religion has been repoliticized. From this perspective, “the return of the sacred” becomes even more puzzling.

To solve the puzzle, we may need to start over. We may need to overhaul Brubaker’s analysis of religion and language. The first thing to notice is that Brubaker’s definition of language is very thin. Is language just a neutral “medium of communication”? Not really, as anyone who knows their Bourdieu will agree (Bourdieu and Thompson 1991). Brubaker has read his Bourdieu, of course, and so he readily concedes that: “The rules and practices governing the language of public life cannot help massively advantaging people with certain language repertoires, while disadvantaging others” (Brubaker 2015: 89). If the “linguistic turn” in the social sciences has taught us anything, after all, it is that human language is shot through and through with power.

Of course, it would be equally mistaken to claim that language is nothing but a medium of power. As Jürgen Habermas and his followers have persuasively argued, human language is pragmatically oriented toward intersubjective agreement (Habermas 1985). This is why systems of domination always involve some measure of deception. This may involve consciously deceiving others; or it may involve unconsciously deceiving oneself. “Hypocrisy is the compliment that vice pays to virtue” as the saying goes. This also why we can envision an “ideal speech situation” in which language would really be a “neutral medium,” at least in theory.

Nonetheless, the contrast that Brubaker draws between language qua “neutral medium” and religion qua “authoritative, binding, and comprehensive set of norms” is clearly overdrawn. Language can emancipate, empower, and individuate; but it can also oppress, constrain, and normalize.

If Brubaker’s definition of *language* is too thin, then his definition of *religion* is rather narrow. Many scholars of religion have preferred a more capacious conceptualization. Durkheim famously defined religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden” (Durkheim 1995: 44). For him, all collective rituals and representations are religious in some meaningful sense.

Or consider Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s phenomenological approach (Berger and Luckmann 1966). They argue that religion arises out of “transcendence.” Here “transcendence” must be understood phenomenologically rather than ontologically. It has to do with the structure of experience, not the structure of reality. For them, any experience that takes us out of the immediate here and now is transcendent in some sense. As such, it may come to be understood religiously.

If we adopt a more expansive definition of religion, then it is no longer so clear that a state can be neutral with respect to religion. After all, not even the most avowedly secular polities have dispensed with sacred rituals and representations. Could the American empire do without its state funerals and national flags? I am not so sure. Nor is the phenomenology of the political bereft of transcendental experiences. Anyone who has invested themselves in a political campaign or a social movement will likely have experienced some moments of “collective effervescence.”

Nor is it at all clear that a polity could really be “neutral.” Even the most avowedly secular versions of political liberalism—one thinks of John Rawls and his students—have fallen well short of this ideal (Rawls 2005). True, they desacralize the state and its rituals. But only to sacralize the individual and her rights. They refuse all forms of moral authority and religious tradition. But always in the name of the autonomous citizen and public reason. Their vision of secularity does not really do away with sacrality.

But it might be objected that the foregoing definitions of religion are *too* capacious. And not without reason. True, religious rituals and sporting contests can both generate “collective effervescence.” Likewise, marking the stations of the cross and taking a walk in the woods can both lead to transcendent experiences. But analogies are not equivalencies.

Nonetheless, Brubaker’s definition of *religion* still remains too narrow. Religion can indeed be a source of authority and norms. But it can also be fount of solidarity and meaning. And once we have thickened our definition of *language* and broadened our conception of religion, the differences between language and religion are greatly diminished. Certainly, they do not suffice to explain the return of the sacred and the depoliticization of language.

But has language really been depoliticized? What Brubaker presumably has in mind in making this claim is the declining number of disputes about “national” or “official” languages. Of course, these disputes have not entirely disappeared, as anyone who has visited Quebec or Catalonia recently can attest. Still, if we are comparing the present moment with the heyday of nationalist and anti-imperialist mobilization during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, then Brubaker surely has a point.

However, if we construe “the politics of language” a little more broadly, then Brubaker’s diagnosis becomes a great deal less compelling. Consider the vitriolic debate about “political correctness” and “free speech” on college campuses in the United States. The central question is whether college administrators can legitimately ban certain forms of speech qua “hate speech” while encouraging others in the name of “social justice.” Proponents emphasize inclusion and equality across racial and gender difference. Opponents stand on freedom of speech and expression between rights-bearing individuals. As such, the debate concerns the most fundamental values of Western liberal democracy, namely, equality and freedom.

Nor is the debate confined to college campuses any longer, if, indeed, it ever was. Conservatives and libertarians have been railing against “political correctness” for some time now. And Donald Trump’s recent attacks on “political correctness”—which is to say, his willful violation of long-standing norms of civil discourse in

American politics—helped to fuel his victory in the 2016 Republican presidential primaries and propel him into the White House.

Nor is it so clear any more that the politics of language in the narrower sense is even a thing of the past. The recent resurgence of nativism and populism in America and Europe may well put questions about national and official languages back on the public agendas of Western democracies in the near future. One can easily imagine a new “English only” movement in the United States or the United Kingdom or disputes over “bilingual” or “second language” education for recent migrants to the European Union taking off in the coming years.

So, why this “return of language”? Explanations are ready to hand: global migrations that are changing the cultural make-up of Western democracies; demographic processes that are shifting the demographic composition of Western populations; wage stagnation amongst the native-born working classes that is fueling nativist resentments; admissions policies at elite universities that are generating more diverse student bodies. Language is not just a medium of communication in these struggles over nation, class, and race. It is a medium of classification and therefore of domination. Whence, the “return.”

Does the return of language have anything to do with the return of the sacred? If there is any general connection at all, I suspect it has less to do with any deep similarities or differences between religion and language and more to do with the deepening of pluralism in the West. In the United States, for example, the “return of public religion” in the form of the religious right was at least partly a response to efforts to privatize religion by the secular left during the middle decades of the twentieth century. And one effect of the ensuing “culture wars”—and of religious fundamentalism more generally—has been a return of public atheism, more vehemently in an effectively post-Christian Europe but with increasing visibility in a majority Christian United States. In Europe, of course, it is the “problem of Islam” that has reignited the issue of public religion.

In short, I am not certain that the politics of language and religion are really all that different or that such differences as there may be have a great deal to do with the characteristics of language and religion as such. The return of public religion in the late twentieth century and the new politics of language in the early twentieth century are probably better understood as contingent and conjunctural outcomes explained with the standard tools of political and cultural sociology.

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