

Public Reason

1 The problem of religious belief in *Political Liberalism*

“How is it possible for those affirming a religious doctrine that is based on religious authority, for example, the Church or the Bible, also to hold a reasonable political conception that supports a just democratic regime?”¹

1.1 Shallow version: tolerant religions

“It [the model of an overlapping consensus] contains three views: one affirms the political conception because its religious doctrine and account of free faith lead to a principle of toleration and underwrite the fundamental liberties of a constitutional regime;² ... Here I shall suppose ... that, *except for certain kinds of fundamentalism*, all the main historical religions admit of such an account and thus may be seen as reasonable comprehensive doctrines.”³

1.2 Deep version: *salvation* is at issue

“What the ancient world did not know was the clash between salvationist, creedal, and expansionist religions. ... Christianity made possible the conquest of people, not simply for their land and wealth ... but to save their souls. ... What is new about this clash is that it introduces into people’s conceptions of their good a transcendent element not admitting of compromise. This element forces either mortal conflict moderated only by circumstance and exhaustion, or equal liberty of conscience and freedom of thought.”⁴

2 Why *Political Liberalism* doesn’t solve the deep problem

2.1 Do the burdens of judgment entail tolerant behavior? Must someone who accepts (1) also accept (5)?

“(1) Since many doctrines are seen to be reasonable, those who insist ... on what they take as true but others do not, seem to others simply to insist on their own beliefs when they have the political power to do so.

¹*Political*, p. xxxvii.

²*Political*, p. 145.

³*Political*, p. 170 (emphasis added).

⁴*Political*, pp. xxv-xxvi.

(2) Of course, those who do insist on their beliefs also insist that their beliefs alone are true: they impose their beliefs because, they say, their beliefs are true and not because they are their beliefs. (3) But this is a claim that all equally could make; (4) it is also a claim that cannot be made good by anyone to citizens generally. (5) So, when we make such claims others ... must count us as unreasonable. And indeed we are, as we want to use state power ... to prevent the rest from affirming their not unreasonable views”.⁵

2.2 No

Someone might believe this. ‘Human reason can’t lead to salvation, so (1) is true. But (5) is false for those to whom God has revealed the true path to salvation.’

2.3 Note: Rawls is *not* saying “(1) shows there isn’t enough evidence to support the beliefs that lead to (5)”.

“We try, so far as we can, neither to assert nor to deny any particular comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral view, or its associated theory of truth and the status of values. Since we assume each citizen to affirm some such view, we hope to make it possible for all to accept the political conception as true or reasonable from the standpoint of their own comprehensive view, whatever it may be”.⁶

2.4 What’s so great about being reasonable, compared with salvation?

“how can the values of the special domain of the political ... normally outweigh whatever values may conflict with them? ... values of the political are very great values and hence not easily overridden ... some of these great values ... [are] the values of equal political and civil liberty; fair equality of opportunity; the values of economic reciprocity; the social bases of mutual respect between citizens. ... The values of public reason not only include the appropriate use of the fundamental concepts of judgment, inference, and evidence, but also the virtues of reasonableness and fairmindedness ...”.⁷

⁵*Political*, p. 61. See also p. 138.

⁶*Political*, p. 150.

⁷*Political*, p. 139.

“When these virtues [tolerance, being ready to meet others halfway, reasonableness, and a sense of fairness] are widespread in society and sustain its political conception of justice, they constitute a very great public good, part of society’s political capital. Thus the values that conflict with the political conception of justice ... may be normally outweighed because they come into conflict with the very conditions that make fair social cooperation possible on a footing of mutual respect”.⁸

2.5 Did Rawls admit this?

“Nevertheless, in affirming a political conception of justice we may eventually have to assert at least certain aspects of our own comprehensive religious or philosophical doctrine This will happen whenever someone insists, for example, that certain questions are so fundamental that to insure their being rightly settled justifies civil strife. The religious salvation of those holding a particular religion, or indeed the salvation of a whole people, may be said to depend on it. At this point we may have no alternative but to deny this, or to imply its denial and hence to maintain the kind of thing we had hoped to avoid”.⁹

3 Public reason and less dramatic cases

“This ideal [of public reason] is that citizens are to conduct their public political discussions of constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice within the framework of what each sincerely regards as a reasonable political conception of justice, a conception that expresses political values that others as free and equal also might reasonably be expected reasonably to endorse”.¹⁰

“... why should citizens in discussing and voting on the most fundamental political questions honor the limits of public reason? How can it be either reasonable or rational, when basic matters are at stake, for citizens to appeal only to a public conception of justice and not to the whole truth as they see it?”¹¹

“... our exercise of political power is proper and hence justifiable only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to them as reasonable and rational. This is the liberal principle of legitimacy. And since the exercise of political

⁸*Political*, p. 157.

⁹*Political*, p. 152.

¹⁰*Political*, p. xlviii.

¹¹*Political*, p. 216.

power itself must be legitimate, the ideal of citizenship imposes a moral, not a legal, duty — the duty of civility — to be able to explain to one another on those fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason”.¹²

3.1 What about teaching intelligent design theory?

“While the controversy over intelligent design is superficially about scientific facts, the real debate is more emotional. Evolution cuts to the heart of the belief that humans have a special place in creation. If all things in the living world exist solely because of evolutionary competition and natural selection, what room is left for the idea that humans are made in God’s image or for any morality beyond the naked requirements of survival? Beneath all the complex arguments of intelligent design advocates, Georgetown theologian John Haught agreed, ‘there lies a deeply human and passionately religious concern about whether the universe resides in the bosom of a loving, caring God or is instead perched over an abyss of ultimate meaninglessness’”.¹³

3.2 What about the civil rights movement?

Inclusive interpretation of the limits of public reason. Giving religious reasons acceptable when it “best encourages citizens to honor the ideal of public reason and secures its social conditions in the longer run ...”.¹⁴

Abolitionists and civil rights movement “would not have been unreasonable ... if the political forces they led were among the necessary historical conditions to establish political justice ...”.¹⁵

3.3 Thomson’s argument

1. Restrictive regulation severely constrains women’s liberty.
2. Severe constraints on liberty may not be imposed in the name of considerations that the constrained are not unreasonable in rejecting.
3. The many women who reject the claim that the fetus has a right to life from the moment of conception are not unreasonable in doing so.

¹²*Political*, p. 217.

¹³*Washington Post*, 5 February 2006.

¹⁴*Political*, p. 248.

¹⁵*Political*, p. 250.