

Reasonable Pluralism – Justified Beliefs
Religious Faith in a Pluralist Society

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The Fact of Pluralism

Modern societies are pluralist societies. Yet acknowledging this means more than just taking note of a social and cultural fact. The term pluralism denotes a normative attitude towards the plurality of beliefs and life projects. When we philosophers talk about pluralism we mean not only the *de facto* difference we observe, but also the legitimacy of that diversity.

The genesis of this idea of legitimate pluralism is usually understood as a response to the bitter historical lesson taught by the wars of religion. The notions of religious tolerance and the neutrality of the state concerning world views are usually seen as the primary root of the idea of the liberal state subject to the rule of law. The characteristic features of the solution which was liberalism's response to the crisis of social stability and legitimacy generated by the fact of religious pluralism – the “invention” of the neutral state subject to the rule of law – are familiar to us all: state action that is legally bound by the libertarian principle of individual religious freedom for all, by the egalitarian principle of the equality of religions and confessions, and by the principle of neutrality, or equal treatment of religious and non-religious beliefs.

Following the collapse of socialism, this liberal rationale of the democratic state subject to the rule of law now appears to be, worldwide, the only remaining and accepted model of legitimate political order. Its particular persuasive force is drawn from its ability to deliver a reasonable and non-violent answer to the questions of both legitimization and integration that are generated by pluralist societies. Evidently, the only remaining “natural antagonist” of political liberalism, liberal democracy and a pluralist society has proved to be religious fundamentalism.

“Postmodern” Radicalization of Pluralism: Recognition of Difference

The phenomenon of religious fundamentalism points to a problem of classical liberal theory. As this millennium dawns, the ongoing radicalization of social and cultural pluralism which was always inherent in modernity has now taken on dramatic dimensions. As this process continues, various critiques of the liberal model of pluralism are emerging. According to these views, the diversity of lifestyles and value-orientations is now so advanced that the

compromise struck by classical liberalism between individual autonomy and the neutrality of the state concerning world views is no longer adequate. This because, so it is argued, the compromise in question draws its life blood from the tacit hegemony of a certain culture, despite the plurality which undoubtedly exists. Thus in retrospect, the liberal separations appear to be part of a process of differentiation within one largely homogeneous culture. The Reformation, for instance, did not lead to the establishment of different religions enjoying equal status, but to the differentiation of the one, dominant religion, namely Christianity, into various confessions. Under the conditions of late modernity, this situation has altered radically. Alongside the classical liberal demands for the liberty and equality of individuals are emerging calls for recognition of the cultural identity of different groups. A politics of difference is emerging alongside the traditional liberal principle of neutrality.

“Reasonable Pluralism”: John Rawls and the Program of Political Liberalism

It is the altered situation of radicalized pluralism just outlined, to which first and foremost John Rawls has responded with his conception of “political liberalism”. The methodological challenge posed by this dramatically radicalized pluralism consists in the suspicion that the liberal program of a state that remains neutral on issues of world view is itself the expression of merely one particular cultural tradition. According to Rawls, acknowledging the fact of pluralism also entails acknowledging the fact that there are a plurality of competing and reasonable theories of justice.

Rawls proceeds on the epistemological assumption that it is not possible to distinguish one specific notion of justice attached to certain beliefs concerning the nature of the person, the purpose and the goal of human life, or in short to a certain conception of what constitutes the Good. The notion of justice embraced by “political liberalism” is a rational construct which raises no truth claims, i.e. abandons all claim to be in possession of a certain fundamental truth concerning the human being. Rawls terms the former notions of justice, upon which rest the traditional political philosophies, including that of classical liberalism, “metaphysical”. By contrast, Rawls’ political liberalism is founded on a “political” conception of justice.

A political, non-metaphysical conception of justice rests on the idea of society as a system of (fair) cooperation, and not on any substantial conception of the Good. Concerning the individual, it places its hopes in a political conception of the citizen rather than a comprehensive theory of human subjectivity and identity. However, a notion of justice of this kind – termed “political” - must be able to draw support from an overlapping consensus, through which it is accepted by advocates of otherwise divergent conceptions of the Good as

being the conception of justice binding for all. According to Rawls it is in principle evident to all citizens that fundamental goods of fair cooperation such as freedom and equality are core and constitutive elements of a free-standing conception of justice. These elements can be interpreted and accepted as binding from the perspectives of advocates of the various comprehensive doctrines, e.g. religious beliefs – without those doctrines being incorporated into the underlying justification of the free-standing conception of justice. The question as to whether and under what conditions such a free-standing conception of justice can be accepted from the perspective of religious beliefs constitutes an excellent test of the viability of this conception of reasonable pluralism.

The common bond linking the citizens of a pluralist democracy is reason, not their religion. This is one of political liberalism's basic articles of faith. Under pluralist conditions it cannot be expected that religions provide a store of beliefs that can be shared by all. Citizens do not as such necessarily hold religious beliefs, though they do possess capacities of reason. A political philosophy proceeding from assumptions of this kind anchors the principles of legitimate legal order and stable social cooperation in the faculties of reason common to all citizens. The liberal position insists on the principle of moral justification, according to which all norms only appear legitimate if and when they can be accepted in principle by all affected persons. This principle must be made to apply above all in cases where the justification of laws and coercive state sanctions is at stake, given that such decisions affect all citizens *nolens volens*. Consequently, they must be justified on grounds that can in principle be shared by all affected persons, in other words all citizens. Since they are highly controversial, religious beliefs would seem to be out of the question for this purpose. Consequently, so it is recommended, in public debates where the legitimacy of laws and state actions are being disputed, citizens should confine themselves to the use of religious arguments for which independent, secular reasons can be given.

Critique of the Liberal Separation of Religion and Politics

This conception has elicited an array of critical responses from authors of a religious persuasion, some of them vehement. For instance, the model of the liberal separation of religious beliefs and political public has been criticized on the grounds that, on closer inspection, the neutrality of liberalism's conception of justice vis-à-vis world views is exposed as a subtle form of unfairness. Contrary to its own tenor, so the criticism goes, political liberalism gives preferential treatment to certain notions of a clearly particular nature,

whilst arbitrarily excluding others, such as religious beliefs, from the public space. It is further argued that this leads to an unjustified, disproportionate exclusion of religious beliefs from the public space. It is therefore not evident to such critics why religious beliefs in particular should be excluded from elementary political debates, on the grounds that they are not shared by all citizens. A large number of other ethical beliefs and moral conceptions are never excluded from such debates, even though they are not shared by all, and are rejected by many citizens on reasonable grounds. The fact for instance that many citizens reject utilitarianism is evidently not seen as justifying the exclusion of utilitarian arguments from moral theory and legal debates. Critics therefore conclude that the preferential exclusion of religious beliefs from the public space seems unjustified and unfair.

Critique of this kind is often linked to a broader social critique of our times. It is often argued, for instance, that the privatization of religion leads to a trivialization of the political.¹ A society in which religion is considered a hobby or a private recreational activity threatens to become infinitely banal, it is argued. At the same time, the notion of fair cooperation among all citizens based exclusively on neutral reason seems like an abstract, utopian ideal. Religious beliefs are replaced not by the bond of reasonably grounded respect towards all one's fellow citizens, but by the calls of one's own wallet, one's private life, one's nation. A society in which religious voices remain silent, it is argued, will ultimately be dominated by private and group interests. The only vital alternative to this trend is being undermined by the exclusion of religion from the political public; liberalism is sawing off the branch on which it sits. It is not the exclusion of religion from the political public which would help avert the risk of an emergent uncivilized culture, but on the contrary its integration and participation.

The objection that political liberalism's model of justice is unfair to religious beliefs, thus in this instance violating its own elementary principle of justice as fairness, is a particularly forceful one. In this context, critics point above all to the unequal terms of entry to public debates. According to this assessment religious persons, if they wish to participate in political discourses as equal partners, are required to temporarily disregard an unfairly greater proportion of the fundamental beliefs which constitute their identity than are persons with secular liberal prejudices. Consequently, it is argued, an unfair distribution of argumentative burdens and an enforced schizophrenia prevail: the religious subject must partition off vital components of her personality, if she wishes to be a publicly acknowledged citizen in political

¹ Stephen Carter, "Evolutionism, Creationism, and Treating Religion as a Hobby", *Duke Law Journal* 1987: 977-96, p. 978; cf. idem, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*, New York 1993.

discourses. Liberalism is therefore to a considerable degree unfair towards those persons who wish to lead a “ religiously integrated existence”.

In view of such massive criticism, liberal theory must indeed develop a greater sensitivity towards the violations of integrity that may arise from the principle of neutrality and formal equality. Apparently neutral legal notions evident to all reasonable citizens may in reality be merely hegemonic concepts which reflect the prejudices of dominant groups. A philosophical analysis of the concepts concerned can make an effective and practical contribution here to political self-critique and self-correction. It can render transparent the reasons why the liberal point of view must acknowledge the possibility of error, and therefore be open to critique and correction of its own position. This openness and self-critical capacity must also be expected of the religious person, however. She too must be sensitive to violations she inflicts on those of different persuasions through her unjustified actions and beliefs. The religious person too must therefore be willing to correct her own views and be open to rational critique. In short, she must acknowledge the general requirements of reason. Yet why should she satisfy these requirements, which appear to demand that she relinquish elementary views that constitute her identity?

The philosophy of religion faces the extraordinarily important task of demonstrating that this requirement of providing a reasonable account is itself well-grounded and appropriate, and that it can be met without the interests, integrity and self-understanding of religious persons being violated. Facing the fact of pluralism, the philosophy of religion thus has the task of demonstrating that:

1. Religious persons have a basic duty to offer a reasonable account of their religious beliefs.
2. This duty to offer a reasonable account also requires religious persons to justify their own beliefs to persons holding different religious beliefs or no religious beliefs at all.
3. This duty to offer a reasonable account can be fulfilled without subjecting religious faith totally to external, secular criteria.

The Duty to Offer a Reasonable Account of Beliefs

If we construe the acquisition and advocacy of beliefs as actions, or in close analogy to actions, then it becomes evident that the duty to offer a reasonable account of beliefs is a general one. Beliefs too can be viewed in a normative context; like actions they can be

justified or unjustified, permissible or prohibited.² A person who holds or acquires beliefs for which she is unable to offer any reasonable account is failing to perform her intellectual duty towards both herself and others of doing precisely that.

This comparison of beliefs with actions draws attention to the fact that there are different degrees of accountability, as well as distinctions within the broader duty to offer reasonable account. At the same time there are, just as in moral philosophy, a variety of approaches to grounding that duty, e.g. teleological, deontological or realist approaches. Thus there is simply no such thing as the compulsion to offer account, or the requirement of reason. As a matter of principle, different modes of reasonably accounting for beliefs must be respected. The requirements that reasonable accounts need to satisfy arise for a variety of reasons, and it can and must be possible to satisfy them in a variety of ways. This has crucial implications for the issue of a possible reasonable account of religious belief under pluralist conditions.

Adopting a trichotomy loosely based on concepts employed by Alvin Plantinga, it is possible to distinguish three forms of rendering reasonable account of religious beliefs: demonstration of rationality, justification and proof of warrant. The terms rationality, justification and warrant are used in different contexts to mean a wide variety of things. In our context I will use them to mean the following: "Offering a reasonable account" is a general term denoting explication of the relationship between a belief and the reasons on which it is founded. This relationship can be subjective, intersubjective or objective. An account is subjective when the belief is founded on its relationship to other beliefs held by the person in question. It is intersubjective when other persons acknowledge the belief, for shared reasons. A belief is objectively accounted for on the grounds of its relationship to certain facts. On the basis of this distinction between subjective rationality, intersubjective justification and objective warrant, key objections or fears concerning the liberal demand that only those religious arguments are permissible in public debates for which independent secular reasons can be given, can be effectively countered.

Demonstration of Rationality

Underlying this issue of the rationality of religious beliefs is the specifically modern intellectual situation that it no longer appears rational to believe that God exists. It seems that modern people have to decide either to be rational, or to believe that God exists. The modern mind-set also assumes that a decision in favor of rationality is to be preferred. In this sense the question of rationality denotes a teleological model of reasonable account: Rationality is a

² This view is expounded most authoritatively in: W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief", in: idem, *Lectures and*

value which belongs to the self-understanding of the enlightened participants of a modern culture. But only when rationality is construed in a certain way does the suspicion arise that religious beliefs are irrational. This understanding of rationality has become known in the analytical philosophy of religion as the "evidentialist objection". The evidentialist objection assumes that beliefs must be considered irrational unless and until any strong evidence can be brought forward in their favor. In other words, a person who holds views that are not founded on evidence is neglecting her epistemological duty. The evidentialist position can be presented as a conclusion drawn from three premises:

1. If it is not rational to accept certain propositions concerning God, then it is intellectually disreputable to accept them.
2. It is rational to accept propositions concerning God only if such a belief rests on other beliefs that constitute an appropriate evidential basis for this theistic belief.
3. There is no appropriate evidential basis for this theistic belief.

Conclusion: Since the existence of God is not founded on evidence, there exists an obligation not to believe in Him. Theistic religious beliefs are irrational, and therefore unacceptable and intellectually disreputable.

There would appear to be three possible types of response to the evidentialist objection:

1. There is a sound evidential basis for religious beliefs, e.g. proofs of the existence of God.
2. A duty to provide a reasonable account of religious beliefs is to be rejected in principle. Religious belief is not founded on rational insight, but on sources that remain inaccessible to reason such as revelation, tradition or authority.
3. A reasonable account of religious beliefs is logically independent of evidence.

Re. 1): Under present metaphysical conditions, proofs of God's existence would barely seem capable of demonstrating a general evidential basis for religious belief. Such proofs appear more like a philosophical reconstruction of certain religious beliefs which were already held independently of those proofs, hence the beliefs in question must be reasonably accounted for independently of them.

Re. 2): The second strategy of response to the evidentialist objection does not do justice to the outstanding importance of rationality both for human life in general, and for the self-understanding of modernity in particular. The objection that religious beliefs are irrational must be taken seriously, and rejected on its own terms. The third strategy, rejection of the evidentialist criterion as a general principle of rationality, should therefore be the strategy of choice.

This position has been developed for instance by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff under the heading of "reformed epistemology". Here, rationality is understood as a person-centered conception of reasonable account. Rationality is always understood relative to the values, preferences and attitudes of a person. The rationality of a belief cannot be judged in general or abstract terms, without considering the belief system of the person concerned. The point of departure for this conception of rationality are therefore persons, who at any given point in time already hold a certain number of beliefs. A criterion of rationality is a criterion for selection from amongst these beliefs. According to Wolterstorff, the epistemological principle of innocent-until-proven-guilty is sufficient to demonstrate the rationality of a belief: A person is rationally entitled to hold certain beliefs as long as she has no appropriate reason to abandon them. Our beliefs are rational to the extent that there is no reason *not to hold* them. They are not necessarily irrational merely because there is no appropriate reason *to hold* them.

Thus the innocent until proven guilty principle reverses the burden of proof of the rationality of beliefs which was introduced by the evidentialist objection. As long as no external objections can be shown to be compelling, beliefs are subjectively well-founded.

Furthermore, the non-rationality of a belief is not a compelling reason to abandon it. This is because it cannot be demonstrated from a teleological perspective why the value of rationality must enjoy absolute preference over other goods such as happiness or life purpose. A reasonable account of why reason should enjoy such priority would require a deontological mode of rendering that account. Precisely such a deontological mode of rendering reasonable account is described by the model of intersubjective justification.

Justification

Similar to the term rationality, "justification" denotes a negative and indirect form of accounting for religious beliefs. Unlike rationality, however, the term intersubjective justification denotes a deontological model of rendering account. With respect to other persons, we have an unconditional duty to justify our beliefs. We do, after all, owe those

others affected by the consequences of our beliefs, a reasonable account with which they can engage.

The model of intersubjective justification has a genuine place in moral philosophy. Within the philosophy of religion it appears to be the most neglected of the three types of account, even though it is the most important where the relationship between religious and non-religious beliefs is concerned. It is, in other words, the form of rendering reasonable account which takes on special significance in our context of *de facto* world view and religious pluralism. This type of justification becomes highly relevant in situations where a reasonable account of beliefs is required that goes beyond the context in which certain beliefs are already accepted. This is the case chiefly where beliefs have consequences which will inevitably also affect those who do not share the beliefs in question – as in the case of laws and legal coercion. Unlike at the level of rationality, in this situation a duty to refrain from subjecting others to the consequences of the beliefs in question arises if the desired reasonable account cannot be produced. A belief that cannot be intersubjectively justified must not be elevated to underpin actions that affect everyone.

This distinction between subjective rationality and intersubjective reason can be clearly illustrated with reference to Rawls. According to Rawls the reasonable, unlike the rational, is intersubjective in a specific way. Rationality can be ascribed to a being from outside, on the basis of observed behavior. But in order to be able to judge whether or not a being is reasonable, we must enter into a cooperative relationship with her. We must enter a "shared public world". The ascription of reasonableness presupposes a public world of intersubjectively shared reasons and principles. Reasonableness cannot be extrapolated solely on the basis of observed behavior, but must be accessed through intersubjective argumentation. Thus intersubjective justification also presupposes cooperation and a joint basis of argumentation that overarches particular contexts. Intersubjective justification is performed with a cooperative attitude, and invests in communication and shared reasons that possess the force to transcend the given context. The intersubjective justification of a belief does not, however, require that a total consensus be achieved in any affirmative sense. Intersubjective justification does not require that a positively compelling account be offered; it merely needs to demonstrate that it is "not reasonable to reject"³ the belief in question.

The intersubjective justification of a religious belief differs from the demonstration of its rationality in that it:

1. seeks to identify reasons that extend beyond the original religious context, and
2. construes the duty to offer a reasonable account in deontological terms, as an unconditional moral imperative.

As with the demonstration of rationality, intersubjective justification also works on the basis of beliefs already held, and reviews their epistemological status. It does not provide a complete positive and reasonable account of why a person should hold precisely that belief in a certain situation. This kind of account is only generated by a strategy which, to borrow a term used by Alvin Plantinga, can be phrased as "proof of warrant".

Proof of Warrant

The question of the warrant for a belief arises when a positive and direct account is sought that goes beyond the negative and indirect process of justification. Locating the warrant means providing a reasonable account in the fullest sense, giving positive reasons as to why it is reasonable that someone should hold precisely that belief in a certain situation. This type of reasonable account of religious beliefs is founded on the relationship between the beliefs in question, and the circumstances of the given epistemological situation. According to Plantinga, a reasonable account of a belief is generally grounded in certain aspects of the situation in which the belief is acquired or held. These aspects need not be other beliefs. They are more likely to be aspects of the particular situation, which elicit certain beliefs. At the same time, these situational aspects serve to uphold the rightness of the beliefs in question. The underpinnings of the warrant for religious beliefs then consist in the proper function of a cognitive system, which is to say in its successful adjustment to an epistemologically relevant environment.

I term this type of reasonable account of religious beliefs "objective". This because the crucial relationship between beliefs and reasons in this instance is constituted neither by the subjective relationship between a belief and values, preferences or other beliefs of the person concerned, nor by the intersubjective relationship between that person and others. It is constituted solely by the relationship between the beliefs and facts, which is to say the epistemologically relevant aspects of the situation in which the belief is generated and in which it is grounded. If we were to continue the analogy between these forms of reasonable account in the philosophy of religion and the categories of moral theory, then we would have to say that this type of account is neither teleological nor deontological, but intuitionist or

³ Thomas M. Scanlon, "Contractualism and Utilitarianism", in: Amartya Sen/Bernard Williams (eds.),

realist. Having said that, this kind of objective warrant of religious belief can only be accessed from the participant's perspective. Unlike intersubjective justification, it does not have the range to stretch beyond and transcend its immediate context. Nor does it deliver an account of any unconditional duty to offer grounds whose reasonableness will be evident to those who do not share these beliefs. The religious person is, however, a participant in a variety of cooperative relationships with others who hold different religious beliefs or none at all, relationships which call for an intersubjective justification that is context-transcendent and, on moral grounds, absolutely imperative.

Conclusion

I have argued that there is a duty to offer a reasonable account of religious beliefs. Depending on the context, however, this obligatory account can be rendered in a variety of modes, with respect to either values, duties or facts – in other words in teleological, deontological or realist mode. The types of account are distinguished by the nature of the relationship between the belief and the reasons on which it is grounded; this may be subjective, intersubjective or objective. Providing a reasonable account of religious beliefs is thus a complex operation which has more than just a single cause, and which must satisfy more than just a single criterion of reason. From this we can draw the following conclusions concerning the justification of religious faith in a pluralist society:

The religious person in a pluralist society has a duty to justify her beliefs on certain political and legal issues such that they can be judged in the light and on the grounds of shared reason. She need not therefore fear, however, that her right to lead a religiously integrated existence, to hold a well-grounded belief and to exercise critique of the secular culture are being challenged. Although intersubjective justification is a necessary aspect of rendering a reasonable account of religious beliefs, it is only one dimension of the more complex process of providing a full reasonable account of those beliefs. Thus the requirement that beliefs be intersubjectively justified does not make the reasonable account of faith which a religious person offers entirely dependent on the agreement of persons holding different religious beliefs or no religious beliefs at all.