

## FAITH AND REASON CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

The papers and comments in this collection made up the October 14, 2011 Faith and Reason Conference at Lincoln University, Jefferson City, Missouri.

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## 1 Secularism and Religion in Modern Democracies

*Brendan Sweetman*

Modern, free, democratic, pluralist societies have many virtues, but they are also increasingly encountering one significant problem, what I call “the problem of pluralism.” This is the problem of how to deal with a number of different, competing, and often conflicting, worldviews or philosophies of life in the modern democratic state, especially at the institutional level, such as in schools, government agencies, political parties, parliament, and most especially at the level of law. This problem can be approached either as a theoretical problem or as a practical problem. At the theoretical level, we would consider this matter as part of our analysis and justification of the theory of the democratic, pluralist state. This involves thinking about how procedurally such a state can be established and can function as a stable political entity if it is trying to accommodate and facilitate many different approaches to and understandings of the nature of reality, the human person, and issues concerning moral values, and the meaning of life. It is also very important when considering the theoretical question to think about how the values and procedures upon which the state is founded are *themselves* justified without seeming to privilege one particular worldview in the state over others. But the problem of pluralism can also be approached from a more practical point of view—as a practical problem facing a particular state, or various states, in the real world right now, states that have some combination of a constitution, laws, procedures, and executive, legislative, and judicial arrangements, *already in place*, states which then have to grapple with problems of competing worldviews *within this framework*. For example, there might be three major approaches in a particular state for thinking about the allocation of healthcare resources, or how to deal with poverty, or on the issue of abortion, or

stem cell research, and the state must have some procedure for making decisions about these matters.

It is not my intention to discuss or resolve the complex but fascinating problem of pluralism here, but I do want to draw attention to a key point that is frequently overlooked in this discussion—that, in the context of modern pluralism, we must now regard secularism as one of those worldviews that plays a quite significant role in the direction and nature of the modern state. And, further, once we do this, our whole understanding of the role of religion in the modern state is transformed as well. I have argued elsewhere and want to repeat here that secularism must now be seen as a positive worldview in the modern world that takes its place alongside other traditional (religious) worldviews in shaping the issues of the day. Secularism must not be understood as simply the view that there is no God, or that religious doctrines are not true, or that religious morality should be rejected, or something along these lines. We need to focus on what secularists believe (and on what they desire politically) rather than on what they do not believe. Secularism, in very general outline, may be understood as the view that all of reality is physical in nature, consisting of some configuration of matter and energy. Secularists also usually hold that everything that exists either currently has a scientific explanation, or will have a scientific explanation in the future. This view would also hold that the universe is a random occurrence, as is the existence of life on earth, including human beings. Supporters of this approach also insist on secularist accounts of morality and politics.

Our failure to appreciate that secularism is now a major cultural player and shaper of modern society has led to many confusions in our contemporary approach to and understanding of pluralism. We often say today that we are living in a secular state, or that people are becoming more and more secular, or that secularization is sweeping the globe, and so forth.

These points are all true, but are only part of the story, and no longer the most important part. For this use of the term “secular” is intended only in a negative sense. It means that the religious way of looking at things, broadly understood, is losing its influence, or that “secularization,” which is often not carefully defined but which usually means something like consumerism, materialism, technology, this-worldly, etc., is pushing issues of the spiritual and moral life aside, but only rarely do we focus on what it is that is proposed as a replacement for the religious outlook. And this is where we need to start thinking and talking in terms of secularism as a positive worldview (what secularists believe) rather than in terms of “the secular” (what secularists reject).

So when some thinkers argue that we are now a more secular society, or that we need to promote a more secular approach—that this would be a good thing for modern democratic states—what do they mean? I am suggesting that this view cannot mean that we want to promote a *secularist* state, and that religious views should have no place in the political sphere. This is because secularism is simply one view among many in the modern state, and why should we grant secularism a privileged position among all of the worldviews? To be more specific, why should we give preference to secularist views of morality when deciding questions concerning abortion or stem cell research over various religious views (and let us note, as others have pointed out on *e-IR* and elsewhere, that there are various types of secularism, just as there are various types of religion, but this does not affect my general point).

Now supporters of secularism might argue that we should in fact promote a secularist state, that a secularist state would be better in general for progress, that is, a state guided by secularist accounts of reality, the human person, morality and the good life. One might want to promote what I call a *seculocracy*, which means a state where the laws are based on a secularist

ideology or worldview (just as we sometimes call a state based on a religious ideology a theocracy). Or in the language of the U.S. Constitution, secularists might argue for a state where *their* views on significant political, social, and moral questions are established in law. One might believe and argue publicly that this is the best way forward for modern democracies. However, this position faces a major problem: while one is perfectly free to hold this position oneself, and to argue for it publicly, and even to argue that other (religious) worldviews are irrational, or that the secularist view is superior or whatever, one must recognize that in a free society many will argue just the opposite. In a free society, any type of restriction or suppression of a view *before* a public debate is held violates the basic principles of democracy and freedom.

As a possible way around this problem, one could instead adopt the approach that one can give *good reasons* for excluding religious views from politics, and so the secularist view should then dominate, or win by default. For instance, one might argue that religious beliefs are not rational, that secularist beliefs are more rational, or that religious beliefs are based on “faith,” or authority, or tradition, and that secularist beliefs are not, and so secularist beliefs are rationally superior. In short, one might argue that there is something “wrong” with religious arguments, some “problem” with them that does not apply to secularist arguments. But one must be very careful if one adopts this response. I agree that when one presents arguments in the public square, especially arguments that would shape society and culture, one needs to give rational arguments. But the religious believer will argue that religion has a rational side to it, has a long tradition of reason, and that we can appeal to this rational tradition as the philosophical justification for our religious beliefs. For example, one might argue that God exists, and is the creator of life, that life is extremely valuable, that the fetus is an innocent human life, and should be protected in law. Or one might argue that God created all people equally, and so racial

segregation is wrong, or that it is part of God's moral law that we are our brother's keeper, and so we should support social welfare programs, and so forth. And arguments like these would not just assert the existence of God, but argue that it is rational to believe in God (the actual argument could be assumed in the public debate, but would be available in other venues, such as academia).

A secularist would no doubt reply that religious arguments like these are not rational, which is his right; however, he can't use this opinion to somehow restrict these religious arguments from influencing public debates. As I pointed out, he is free to believe that such arguments are not rational, but not free to restrict those who do not agree with him. One cannot restrict a belief in a free society just because one disagrees with it politically, nor even because one thinks it is irrational. I would accept that in a democratic society we should try to be as reasonable as we can, should especially try to give reasons that would persuade others, so I would agree that one should *not* appeal to religious texts, or authorities, or to private experiences, in public arguments, as long as secularist-type arguments that are based on similar sources are also restricted in the same way.

Sometimes one will hear the objection that an appeal to "the secular" or to "secular reason" does not necessarily mean that one is advocating *secularism*. The use of the term "secular reason," it might be argued, simply means that one appeals (or should appeal) to reason and evidence in one's arguments on various issues. The word "secular" means only that one is making no appeal to religion; so a thinker who argues that one should appeal only to secular reasons in politics is not covertly suggesting that *secularism* should be the default worldview, and so arbitrarily prejudicing the debate against religion. But again this argument is not sufficient to rule religious arguments out of public life. We need to be careful about what the

phrase “secular reason” means here. If it just means “reason,” then reason can be used to establish the rationality of basic religious beliefs, so the religious believer will argue (and it is irrelevant whether the secularist agrees with this or not from the point of view of a free democracy). That is to say, reason can be used to establish the rationality of basic religious premises and conclusions. But if the phrase means “secularism,” then we are back to the same problem as above. For to say that an argument that appeals to reason only can’t have (in principle) a conclusion with religious content is really just to say that religious beliefs are irrational, or at least not as rational (and so not as worthy) as secularist beliefs. One might, of course, be convinced of this oneself, but this is not enough; one has to convince the religious believer too if one wants to restrict religious belief in politics, and that is why no such argument can succeed. One of the often unstated assumptions of secularism is that “secular reason” (understood as secularism) is the same thing as reason. Religious believers of course will reject this understanding of reason, and in any case this is where the debate begins in a free society, not where it ends.

What does all of this mean for separation of church and state, usually regarded as a very important principle in a democracy? The separation of church and state means that we must not make our own particular worldview, be it religious or secularist of whatever strand, the official worldview of the state. We might ask if secularists want everyone to be secularists or do Catholics want to make everyone Catholics? The general answer to this question in most worldviews is no, at least not to convert people by force; if conversion happens freely, by persuasion, well and good. But just because we don’t necessarily want to convert people to our particular worldviews, this does not mean and *cannot* mean that we do not wish to *influence* the state, the culture, and especially the law, by means of *some* of our beliefs. All of us want to do

this no matter what our worldview; it is unavoidable in any case, because *somebody's* (or some group's) values will be shaping our cultural, moral and legal decision-making, and, as a simple matter of logic, not all values can be accommodated. For example, if a state makes stem cell research on human embryos, or human cloning, legal, then those who think these practices are immoral and should be illegal lose out, and the values of those who support these practices become culturally dominant. There is, in short, no such thing as a neutral public square.

So we need to be very careful about adopting the rhetoric of church/state separation simply as way of keeping religion (and so political views we don't agree with) out of public square debates. One can only insist on a separation of church and state if one means that the state will have no official religion, but we cannot invoke this separation if we mean that religious beliefs and values cannot be appealed to to influence society and culture. If this is what is meant, then secularists would be contradicting themselves every time they then go on to make an argument for cultural change based on *their* values. And I have already shown why one can't reply to this point by saying that in fact secularism is actually superior anyway to any religious view, because no argument along these lines can succeed in restricting religious arguments in politics in a free society. If you subscribe to democracy, and believe in a free, open society, one cannot then turn around and restrict a view from trying to gain cultural influence just because one does not agree with it. One can argue against it publicly of course—indeed, one hopes that the public exchange of ideas can serve as a kind of rational test of various beliefs and arguments—but this is not the same as denying it the opportunity to be expressed in the first place by appeal to some procedural or legal maneuver.

So overall then we need to note the following. First, once we see that secularism is a significant, influential worldview in itself, it changes our whole way of thinking about

church/state issues, and more generally about the role of religion in the modern democratic state. We must now see that the key philosophical question concerns how *all* worldviews come into contact with the state, and not just religious ones. Two, the reasons we give for keeping religion out of the debate at the beginning—before the democratic process has been played out—are now seen as suspect in a free society, with the one provision that *we should all at least strive to be as reasonable as we can*, meaning that we should try to give the best, most logical reasons, arguments and evidence to those we are trying to persuade (this also involves bringing all academic disciplines, where relevant, into the discussion). This is a real problem, however, in modern societies because of the increasing polarization between the worldviews, the attack on reason seen in areas like postmodernism, the increasing influence of epistemological and moral relativism, multiculturalism, etc., but this is a problem for every worldview. We cannot resolve this problem by forbidding worldviews we don't like to speak (nor can we resolve it by abandoning reason and justification, and allowing a free for all). Third, we must recognize that we are all trying to shape culture by means of our values and beliefs, and so we need to stop picking on members of various religious worldviews, as if they are the only ones doing this. Four, we should not appeal to church/state separation as a political tactic to silence views because we disagree with them politically. Five, we must also keep in mind the general question of how the democratic state is itself justified (is it part of one's worldview, or in place before one's worldview, and if the latter—which is the position of political philosopher John Rawls—how are the values on which it is based selected and justified?).

Lastly, the deepest question perhaps of all is how do modern democracies (now looking at the issues in the way suggested in this essay) solve or at least contain the problem of pluralism, without resorting to the suppression of some views, without producing too many

disgruntled citizens, without abusing political power, and without slipping into moral and political relativism. This is one of the most difficult questions facing both twentieth first century democratic political theory, and existing democratic states.

## **2 Embodied Religion and Liberal Society: the Obstacle of De Facto Established Religion**

*Kevin Carnahan*

Attempts to determine the proper place of religion in liberal society have played an important role in most of the significant political-philosophical theories of the later twentieth century. Strangely, in the midst of the debate there is little critical effort spent assessing the definition of religion. Usually, the primary topic of discussion is the relative robustness of the concept and ethic of liberalism. Inevitably, however, inasmuch as the concept of liberalism is defined, in part, by its relation to religion, the lack of adequate attention to the definition of religion obscures the discussion of liberalism itself. Today, I will argue (1) that a representative sample from debates on liberalism and religion reveal that participants have embraced a reductive definition of religion, and (2) that embracing a more adequate definition of religion entails embracing a more robust conception of the ethics of liberalism than has usually been assumed in contemporary debate. In the first part of the paper I will review the work of Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff on religion in liberal society, in the second part I will attempt to ferret out a definition of religion from the hints they provide, in the third part I will summarize contemporary criticisms of this conception of religion, in the conclusion I will explore the implications if one accepts a revised definition of religion in liberal society

### I

#### Audi and Wolterstorff on Liberalism

For the purposes of today's presentation, Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff will serve as the representatives of the contemporary debate on religion in liberal society. I choose these representatives because while they represent different poles in the contemporary debate, each manifests the problem I wish to highlight.

Audi's argument begins with a morally substantive conception of liberalism. Liberal societies, he posits, are devoted to religious liberty. In large part to support the range of religious liberty, he proposes three principles to guide the activity of government in relation to religion. First, "the libertarian principle" which protects the freedom of religious expression. Second, "the equalitarian principle" which requires that a state ought not favor any particular religion. Official preference for a religion, Audi claims, will tend to lead to empowerment of that religion *visa vie* alternate religions, and as such, will curtail religious liberty. "Moreover," Audi writes "where a state establishes or prefers a given religion, we may anticipate (though it is perhaps not inevitable) that certain laws will significantly reflect the world view associated with that religion" (6).<sup>1</sup> Finally, Audi finds that liberal governments are also bound by a "neutrality principle" which prevents them from favoring religion(s) *per se* over non-religions.

Having established these limits on governmental action in a liberal society, Audi now turns to the obligations of the liberal citizen. While citizens in a liberal society have the right to offer and act upon any reasons they want in public debate, Audi claims that the virtuous liberal citizen will observe a set of limitations on her or his public activity. This is because liberalism, on Audi's account, entails a certain kind of respect for others as rational beings. Given the assumption of rationality of the other, the liberal prefers persuasion to coercion in all matters. "Thus, when there must be coercion, liberal democracies try to justify it in terms of considerations – such as public safety – that any rational adult citizen will find persuasive and can identify with" (16). According to Audi, given that not all rational adults agree on religious premises, this rules out grounding coercive laws via religious reasons. Thus, he claims, the good

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<sup>1</sup> In text citations are from Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).

liberal citizen ought only support coercive policy if there is sufficiently motivating secular reason for her or him to do so.

Wolterstorff's position overlaps, but also significantly diverges from Audi's. While he significantly qualifies the equalitarian principle, Wolterstorff does affirm Audi's libertarian, equalitarian, and neutrality principle as proper limitations of Government action in a liberal society (149). The two diverge more radically on the question of whether the good liberal citizen ought to deploy and act upon religious reasons in the absence of sufficiently motivating secular reasons.

Wolterstorff's conception of liberalism also requires that citizens manifest respect for one another, but Wolterstorff is doubtful that such respect can be cashed out in terms of the deployment of secular reason. First, Wolterstorff doubts that there is any set of reasons (secular or religious) that are convincing to all rational adults within a liberal society. There just is no tradition and culture independent source for reasons. All reasons are "person relative." Second, on Wolterstorff's conception of liberalism, respect for others entails that we take these others seriously in all their particularity. Thus, it is a violation of liberalism itself to suggest that religious reasons cannot be sufficient motivators for support of public (even coercive) policy. Respect entails that I take you seriously, even if we ground our claims in different points of origin. The truly liberal society is one where there is no assumed common starting point.

## II Audi and Wolterstorff on Religion

Given that the topic of debate between Audi and Wolterstorff concerns the place of religion in liberal public discourse, one might expect them at some point to define religion. After all, both have agreed that, whatever a liberal society is, it is bound not to establish or enforce

religion. If such is the case, it would be worth determining exactly what it is that the state should avoid enforcing. A robust discussion of the topic, however, is notably absent.

Neither Audi nor Wolterstorff is unaware that there are points at which it will not be clear whether some reason or practice is religious. Audi notes that one of the problems with government support for “religion” (in violation of the neutrality principle) would be that the government would be empowered to define religion, and thus would be able to influence different groups to shape their organization and practice to correlate with the official definition (8). He also notes that there may be “considerable difficulty in determining whether a reason one has for doing or believing something is secular” (48). As he notes: “A religious consideration viewed from inside a religious tradition to which one belongs, need have no theological identifying marks and easily seems to be second nature (or perhaps a dictate of purely natural law)” (48). To correct for misperception, Audi suggests that one appeal to clear cases of distinction between religious and secular reasons and to “outsiders” for guidance. Wolterstorff too recognizes that defining religion can be problematic. As he notes, amongst liberals “there is, as one would expect, considerable divergence among the members of the family as to how religious reasons are to be identified, with the consequence that a reason that is disallowed as religious on one proposal is permitted as non-religious on another” (75).

Still, neither of the two directly take up the problem of defining religion. This would not, I believe, be a problem if the concept of religion were a point of little debate. But such is not the case. Indeed, as I shall review below, a broad number of scholars have suggested that the assumed conception of religion in the West is deeply flawed.

Before continuing on to that point, however, it is worthwhile stopping to investigate what Audi and Wolterstorff treat as religion. Exploring examples of religion they take to be clear, we can say something more about what they take religion to be.

What we find in Wolterstorff's writing is extremely sparse as concerns paradigmatic examples of religion. An "established church," he writes, "is as incompatible with the idea of liberal democracy as anything could possibly be" (149). Further, he finds that it would be illiberal to require religious affiliation as a condition for voting rights (76). This suggests that religion is manifest in particular institutions, and that religion is the kind of thing with which one can be publicly affiliated. Such does not provide much to go on in formulating a definition of religion.

Wolterstorff is similarly hard to pin down on the definition of religious reasons. Unlike Audi, Wolterstorff has no interest in distinguishing some independent set of "secular reasons" and, indeed, is skeptical that it is possible on Audi's account to know whether one's reasons are properly secular or not. Most people, Wolterstorff posits, are not aware of the "path" by which they accepted particular claims. As such, they do not know whether or not, for instance, their belief that abortion is wrong was arrived at via their belief that God condemns the practice. This is to say, they are unable to determine whether their claims are religiously grounded or not. However, even given his reservations, Wolterstorff does seem to grant that it is, in principle, possible to distinguish between secular and religious sources for the grounding of principles. On this account, Kantianism, utilitarianism, and intuitionism appear to function as non-religious sources for knowledge of one's obligations. Here, Wolterstorff seems to accept Audi's definition of secular reason. (162-163).

Since Wolterstorff does not provide much in terms of a positive account of religion, and since he does not explicitly protest against Audi's comments in this direction, I shall assume that, where not explicitly contradicting, the two agree. As it turns out, Audi's comments help to fill out the picture in which we are interested.

A good place to start here is in Audi's discussion of obligation. Audi distinguishes between the *ground* and *content* of an obligation:

An obligation can have religious grounds without having religious content, such as theological or liturgical content. This is illustrated by the non-theological commandments among the Ten, for instance the prohibition of bearing false witness: here a principle with secular content is presented as based on religious grounds (11).

Below this quote, Audi identifies the obligation to contribute to charity and the obligation not to murder as other obligations whose content is not religious, while their grounding may be. At times, he seems to suppose that "moral principles" constitute non-religious content (13, 27). In contrast, he suggests that an obligation "to engage in certain rituals" does have religious content, and in the above quotation he notes that "theological or liturgical content" is paradigmatic of religious content. These comments suggest that religious content paradigmatically concerns ritual and religious belief.

For religious grounding, Audi cites five possible sources: scripture, non-scriptural authorities (esp. clergy), tradition, religious experience, and natural theology (10). Elsewhere he suggests what appear to be non-religious sources of obligation: the "duty of fidelity" (in keeping a promise), appeals to the security of society, and appeal to the pure natural law (13, 16, 27, 48). More broadly, again we find the language of morality as the alternative to religious, when Audi treats "moral reasons" as apparently non-religious grounding for obligations (13).

We may be able to go farther here both in elucidating the concept of "religious belief" and of religious grounding by looking at how Audi distinguishes "secular reason." As he writes:

I am taking a secular reason as roughly one whose normative force, i.e., its status as a *prima facie* justificatory element, does not evidentially depend on the existence of God (or on denying it) or on theological considerations, or on the pronouncements of a person or institution *qua* religious authority (26).

The clear implication of this definition is that a reason is religious if it is evidentially dependent on the existence of God, or on reasoning about God. Less helpful, due to circularity, is the last statement inasmuch as it defines secular reason in terms of an absence of dependence on the pronouncements of “religious authority.”

Given this, what can be said about Audi’s paradigmatic account of religion? Religion here is understood as opposed to “morality,” both in content and grounding. Religion is primarily about belief and ritual. Other concerns, while they may be grounded in religious reasons, are not religious in content. Reasons are clearly religious when they depend evidentially upon the existence of God or theological concerns (thus, again emphasizing the significance of belief in this conception of religion).

### III The Problem of “Religion”

As I noted earlier, relying upon common intuitions about religion would be acceptable if it were the case that the concept of religion were relatively uncontested. As it happens, however, common conceptions of religion have come in for quite a wide range of criticism in contemporary scholarship, and most scholars who have investigated the question have found that the common intuitions of western audiences ought to be challenged rather than assumed. These arguments are especially important in the present context inasmuch as the concept of religion that comes in for critique parallels quite neatly the concept that I have drawn from the hints provided by Wolterstorff and Audi.

That “religion” is a problematic category should not surprise anyone who has had an introductory course in religion. There are fundamental conflicts between common intuitions

about, on the one hand, how we populate lists of world religions (e.g. Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Judaism, etc.), and the elements one expects to find in a religion (e.g. belief in the existence of God, hierarchical social structure, revealed scriptures, etc.). According to the critics of the concept of “religion” such intuitive conflicts are predictable given the origins of the concept.

According to the critique of “religion,” the concept of religion is a relatively recent invention. Further, the concept “religion” functions to distort the social, embodied reality it is meant to represent. The Latin term *religio* began as a name for the network of obligations that constituted social relations in the classic world. If the modern concept of religion continued in this vein it would make sense to locate religion as the way in which people live their whole lives in response to a vision of the world. In practice, however, the modern concept of religion ends up reducing this reality. Religion becomes identified narrowly with a set of rituals. Religion becomes narrowed to a set of beliefs. Religion becomes a private issue. Religion is reduced from being *a* culture to being, at most, *an aspect* of culture, or possibly just a personal opinion.

The development of the modern conception of religion reached its culmination in the works of John Locke, who deeply influenced the founding fathers and documents of the United States. Locke’s religion comes to exist in distinction from “nonreligious” issues such as “politics, economics, and other so called secular aspects of a culture.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, in producing this notion of religion, Locke was not drawing on a broad study of global cultures. Rather, he was applying an image drawn from Western, especially Christian, especially Protestant, especially Lutheran, sources. Luther, in part in his effort to protect himself from the political threat represented by the joining of Papal and Imperial power, had advocated a radical

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<sup>2</sup> Kevin Schilbrack, “Religions: Are There Any” *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78.4 (2010), 1127.

reduction of ecclesial power, had construed Christianity as a matter of personal belief and relationship with God, and had construed ritual practice as beyond the proper sphere of control of temporal authorities.

This may have been a useful political strategy, but it is a poor source for an adequate definition of religion. Indeed, as most scholars today recognize, no religion has ever functioned in quite the way that Locke suggested. Historically “religion” was inseparable from culture more generally. Globally, it continues to be impossible to distinguish religion from morality, politics, economics, etc. Even in contemporary western society religions function not primarily as private systems of belief, but as subcultures. Religions are constituted by constellations of belief, practices, mores, etc.

Contemporary scholars who have focused on the definition of religion have tended to move in one of two directions at this point. Some decide that the category of religion is unhelpful, and ought to be abandoned. Others attempt to reformulate a definition of religion that might be able to take account of the criticisms that have been raised. Let us, for the purposes of argument at least, follow the latter group. What would a more adequate account of religion look like? One philosopher sympathetic to the project of renovating the concept of religion puts it thus:

Those who use the label ‘religion’ have to make it clear that a set of practices and beliefs may be a religion not only if it lacks a belief in God, a Bible, or a Sabbath, but also, more radically, even if it has not been articulated as a system, does not have a distinct community, makes dances more central to membership than creeds, and is inseparable from the public life of the culture.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kevin Schilbrack, “Religions: Are There Any?” 1130-1131.

#### IV Revisioning Liberalism

If this analysis of the concept of religion is correct, proposals such as Audi's and Wolterstorff's cannot stand. Audi's distinctions between religious and secular grounding and content collapse under the weight of an understanding of religion as a form of culture. The grounding of a claim seems to be religious, not due to its evidential dependence upon the existence of God, etc., but due to its place and function within a religious culture. The religious content of a claim cannot be established by assessing whether or not it directly concerns religious belief, ritual or religious institutions. Rather, the content must be assessed by whether or not it is distinctive to this particular form of culture.

Inevitably, such a shift in conceiving of religion leads to a shift in conceiving of liberalism. I will conclude by pointing out one area in which this shift has implications for conceiving of the ethics of liberalism: the establishment of religion.

Let us assume that Audi and Wolterstorff are right in supporting the "equalitarian principle," which prohibits the establishment and enforcement of religion in liberal society. What happens if the religion that liberal society is prohibited in establishing is something different from what Audi and Wolterstorff supposed?

So long as religion is conceived primarily as concerning beliefs about God, ritual practices and explicitly religious institutions, avoiding the establishment of religion is relatively easy to understand. A religion is established if the government requires religious confessions, forces participation in ritual practices, or somehow favors religious institutions or a religious institution.

If, however, religion is conceived as a culture or subculture the situation becomes more complicated. We cannot determine whether a particular law has "religious" content simply by

looking at whether it supports religious institutions or requires religious belief or participation in ritual. The question of establishment becomes one about whether a law enforces a particular culture.

Take, for instance, the question of Blue Laws in the United States. Blue Laws often required that businesses close on Sunday, or in less ambitious forms, required that alcohol not be sold on Sundays. In the United States, many Blue Laws have been allowed to stand under the argument that they serve a “secular purpose” (advocating rest for the health of the person), and do not enforce ritual practice, religious belief, etc. However, if religion is conceived in broader terms as a culture or subculture, it becomes clear that Blue Laws are a manifestation of a particular religious culture. This is especially the case when the Blue Laws in question regulate access to alcohol on Sundays, a concern typical of Protestant (as opposed to Roman Catholic) culture.

The revision of the definition of religion also has implications for the ethic of the liberal citizen. Support for Audi’s suggestion that the liberal citizen must have sufficiently motivating secular reasoning may be diminished if we understand religion as a culture. Since religion is not seen as so uniquely tied to belief, it is not clear that Audi’s requirement is properly framed. Indeed, in the light of the redefinition of religion, the focus of the debate between Wolterstorff and Audi seems misplaced. Respect for others in liberal society should not be expressed so much in terms of respect for reasons as in terms of respect for cultures as wholes.

If this is correct, the citizen of a liberal society does seem to have a kind of obligation arising from respect for other citizens that neither Audi nor Wolterstorff suggest. So as to avoid supporting the de facto establishment of religion, the good citizen should never support a policy

if that policy is not supported by citizens who represent other subcultures in the society. This is necessary in order to avoid a tyranny of the majority religion.

Imagine that there is a society in which 54% of the population is United Methodist, and where 46% is Roman Catholic. Imagine further that United Methodist culture strictly opposes the consumption of alcohol. (There need be no scriptural warrant for this, nor any magisterial pronouncement on the matter in order, on my account, to make it a religious requirement). Finally, imagine that Roman Catholic culture has no reservations about the consumption of alcohol. In this imagined context the good United Methodist Citizen of the liberal society ought, on my account, refrain from supporting laws banning alcohol from the society. To support such laws would be to support the establishment of United Methodist Culture for the society, and thus the establishment of religion.

## V Conclusion

If my argument here is correct, there is much work to be done in revisiting classical arguments about religion in liberal society. I have only begun in my last section to lay out some of the implications that the re-evaluation of religion and the revisioning of liberalism would have. Indeed, it is not entirely clear to me what all of the implications of such a shift would be. I invite you to think with me on this subject, or to challenge the whole project now.

**3 Liberal Religion on Permanent Furlough to the Inter-world: Comments on Kevin Carnahan's *Embodied Religion and Liberal Society: the Obstacle of De Facto Established***

***Religion***

*Bruce Ballard*

First of all, thanks to Dr. Kevin Carnahan for a fine paper. His clear exposition of the issues in play makes it easy for his listeners to enter into the conversation. And he is surely on target on the need to clarify the term "religion" for some contemporary discussion. The suggestion that we think of religions as cultures or subcultures "in which people live their whole lives in response to a vision of the world" makes an apt replacement for religion as exclusively or even primarily beliefs or doctrines. It parallels and receives added support from David Holley's recent volume on religions as life-orienting stories. Finally, Dr. Carnahan captures the logic of liberalism for the expanded definition very well.

But it is just this logic that is troubling as it would bring even tighter restriction and exclusion from the public square. Consider the example of the Blue laws forbidding trade on Sunday. Later legislation confirmed these laws for a time on the secular justification of the need for rest. But the Blue laws retain a religious resonance from their point of origin which is familiar to most citizens, a resonance even the alternative secular justification could not eclipse. Hence Blue laws should be struck from the books for favoring biblical religion. That is, every trace of religious expression must be eliminated.

But what if Western law were more intricately and deeply related to its Christian past? Students of legal history are well aware of these formative and constitutive connections. Tracing the years from Christianity's introduction throughout Europe, one can watch the biblicization of law unfolding. And it wasn't just the replacement of pagan law with specific laws from the

Hebrew Bible. Under the pressure of an ever more widely held faith, slavery, infanticide and abortion came to a legal end. In this and other legal ways, love of neighbor was worked into the social structure. The law reflected a new frame of mind. A thorough-going attempt to purge the law of all its Christian inflection, would leave an unrecognizable residue. So we find that religion is an extraneous add-onto Western law, but is partly constitutive of it.

By contrast, on the stringent requirements of liberalism, we ordinarily wait to establish a consensus before making changes. So the liberalist might have been waiting to this day for a consensus against slavery or infanticide. Had the liberal standard been applied at these earlier times (i.e. when slavery and infanticide only violated Christian sentiments), moral progress would have stopped. Yet at the same time, liberalism would have us censor our language in public to the secular standard. Without intending to, in this way liberalism resembles the official atheism of the formerly communist states. What one is taught indirectly by the liberal law's enforced omission of religion from, say, public education, is that religion is unimportant for understanding or conducting ourselves or our societies. Open talk of God even in the halls of public elementary schools brings swift all-round suppression as "inappropriate at school."

But if Charles Taylor is right, liberalist values need the support of religion to make sense. Kant's need to postulate the existence of God and the afterlife to save the rationality of morality is another way of seeing the same dependence relation. So in its secularizing role, liberalism may be cutting itself off at the knees.

And what of those religions for which control of the political and legal powers is constitutive, such as Islam? Here a liberal regime will simply prevent such development, if it is able. That is, it will not remain neutral. Indeed, it cannot. The impossibility of neutrality is even more transparent under the widened sense of religious culture Carnahan brings into play.

To ban abortion would be to favor, say, Catholic and Evangelical Christianity. But to allow it disfavors these groups, necessarily. So neutral law-making is impossible. But with the loss of neutrality the liberal regime has lost its legitimacy. It continues to legislate as a kind of tyranny.

Epicurus, the father of Epicureanism, denied the charge of atheism. Rather, he taught that the gods lived in the inter-world--the space between worlds (i.e. not in our world) where they could affect nothing in our world, indeed were completely irrelevant to it, atheism for all practical purposes. And this appears to be the fate of religion under the widened sense of the term under the liberal regime.

## **4 Can the Religious Person Say Anything?: Delineating the Boundaries for Religious Speech in Public Discourse in Kierkegaard and Habermas**

*Michael Carper*

How is it that one of the most famous Christian thinkers—Soren Kierkegaard—and one of the most famous contemporary secular thinkers—Jurgen Habermas—both seem to agree: the religious has nothing to say in the public realm of social, ethical discourse, since it has no claim there? It is, if it is, a quite unexpected agreement. And if they do agree on this matter, how do they agree? How complete is the agreement, or are there important points of disagreement as well? And what are the implications of this agreement? These are the questions this paper tries to answer.

Due to the time constraints, this paper will first lay out the three problems that define the relationship between the ethical and the religious in Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling, showing how the ethical collides with the religious in the well-known story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, as well as showing how Kierkegaard, for the most part, conforms to Habermas' sense of the ethical. This will entail, of course, contrasting Kierkegaard's respective descriptions of the ethical and religious orientations. This will involve connecting certain points of Kierkegaard with elements of Habermas' position in his discourse ethics and principle of universalization, showing, too, how at points the two thinkers differ on the natures of the ethical and religious. Finally, I will have some concluding remarks to make.

We are all familiar, I think, with the story of Abraham as it is found in Genesis chapter twenty two, as well as how Kierkegaard thematizes the story in his most famous work Fear and Trembling. God wakes Abraham in the middle of the night, commands him to take his son Isaac,

the son he loves (as if Abraham needed reminding), the son given Abraham after years of patient trial, the son of promise, and to travel to Mt Moriah only to draw a knife and sacrifice this son upon an altar. Though God does not have Abraham go through with the sacrifice, nevertheless, Gen. 22 seems to contradict everything that Abraham's life story has been about up to that point. And, of course, the obvious question confronts all of us immediately: how can God, supposedly our omnibenevolent creator, command something that clearly contradicts what we would normally consider to be ethical? How can the All-Good command something so clearly not-Good?

Kierkegaard thematizes this story in a variety of poetic and dialectical ways. In the interests of time, I will look mainly at the dialectical issues. As you know, in the latter half of the work, Kierkegaard asks three questions that materialize from reflection on this story: 1. Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical? 2. Is there an absolute duty to God? 3. Is it ethically defensible for Abraham to conceal his purposes from his wife, son, and surrounding community? These three questions form the heart of the debate concerning the relationship between the ethical and the religious, for Kierkegaard.

As for Habermas, he would respond with a hearty "No" to all three questions, just as Kierkegaard's ethical voice in Fear and Trembling does.

The first question is: is there a teleological suspension of the ethical? This question is posed because Abraham's action actually reveals a complexity to it, **if** it proves not to be a simple, ignorant act of murder. The key has to do with the fact that Abraham appears to love Isaac. If he doesn't, then there is no mystery here—his action is murder. But if he loves Isaac, then we must ask: why does Abraham do this? The answer has to do with the distinction between sacrifice and murder, for they may not be the same thing. In what way, then, is

Abraham not a murderer? The answer that Kierkegaard seems to offer is this: **the ethical must exist if it is to provide (that is, be) a proper sacrifice to, for, the religious.** In other words, if Abraham's action is to constitute sacrifice, and not murder, then Isaac must be the object of his love and care. Abraham must have already in place an ethical relationship with his son. Abraham knows his duty to his son, and he loves this duty, finds joy in fulfilling this duty. Thus, if the religious exists, above and beyond the ethical, it demands that the ethical exists prior to it. The religious demands the ethical as a **presupposition.**

But what is the nature of this presupposed ethical? In response to the question about the teleological suspension of the ethical, Kierkegaard characterizes the ethical in the following manner:

The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which can be put from another point of view by saying that it applies at every moment. It rests immanently in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its telos, but is itself the telos for everything outside, and when that is taken up into it, it has no further to go. (Hannay 83)

Kierkegaard here defines the ethical in three important ways: one, the ethical is the universal, a term which he also defines as that which commands all rational agents and commands them necessarily, **no exceptions.** Two, the ethical exists immanently within, and through, the human. It is not transcendent to the human; it **is** the human, and **defines** the human. This is reinforced by the third point Kierkegaard makes in this passage, that the human *telos* is the ethical; that is, the ethical is **constitutive** of the human, and provides the human its purpose, never being a means for any other ends human beings might craft. Thus, to stray from the ethical is to fail to become human.

So Kierkegaard suggests that Abraham might very well meet the above conditions. Abraham loves Isaac, and wishes to live in the ethical's immanence. But clearly he is not living

out this wish; rather, he **suspends** the ethical, temporarily, all the while he packs for his journey, carries his three day journey out, builds the altar, lights the fire, draws the knife. However, to suspend does not mean to eliminate, or dismiss, or abrogate. It means just what it means—to suspend. In other words, Abraham might very well be adhering to the ethical in one sense, yet not in another. Nevertheless, from the ethical’s perspective, suspension is the same as abrogation, and cannot be permitted. The ethical demands Abraham to dwell in its immanence, and respect its authority. And, as we all know, Habermas makes very similar demands as well. As he recently states in his work, An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age, “religious persons must accept the authority of natural, secular reason in the guise of the fallible results of the institutionalized sciences and the basic principles of universalistic egalitarian law and morality.” (16)

Most scholars believe that Kierkegaard has Kant in mind with this description of the ethical, particularly the first formulation of the categorical imperative, the formulation that gives the moral law its universalizable **form**. “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” And Habermas of course bases his entire discourse ethics on a reconfiguration of Kant’s first formulation. What is of interest in our context, however, is this: “Kant’s first formulation of the categorical imperative is supposed to capture the widespread intuition that one ought not to make an exception of oneself.” (Finlayson 83) This, of course, is what Abraham does, or **perhaps** we should say, what God does to Abraham. From the perspective of the ethical, Abraham strays, makes an exception of himself, and therefore fails to realize his human, that is ethical, telos. Thus, Abraham seems to be one of those typical religious types who claim the rules don’t apply to them. He seems to be a typical sectarian, which is Habermas’ problem with religion.

Now, Habermas claims to be replacing Kant's principle of universalizability with his own version of the principle, what he calls "a procedure of moral argumentation," or his **discourse ethics**. That principle states: "Only those norms may claim to be valid that could meet with the consent of all affected in their role as participants in a practical discourse." (MCCA 197)

Habermas does not so much see moral law as a form to measure individual human action by, but as a **process** or **procedure** carried through in discussion and dialogue by all relevant rational agents. As he says elsewhere:

...discourse ethics rejects the *monological approach* of Kant, who assumed that the individual tests his maxims of action *foro interno*, or, as Husserl put it, in the loneliness of his soul. The singularity of Kant's transcendental consciousness simply takes for granted a prior understanding among a plurality of empirical egos; their harmony is pre-established. In discourse ethics, it is not. Discourse ethics prefers to view shared understanding about the generalizability of interests as the *result* of an intersubjectively mounted *public discourse*. There are no shared structures preceding the individual except the universals of language use. (MCCA 203)

At the heart of the ethical, its telos, its substance, its life, is communicative action and discourse. Ethical life is not carried out within the depths of individual consciousness, but publicly through a shared dialogue. Therefore, instead of justification of the formulations of the moral law themselves, to prove their a priori character, or some such, Habermas offers a **self-justifying process** that "proves" itself by producing actual consensus, or, temporarily failing that, a reasonable means that gives one hope for a consensus. Thus, what I think is really happening in Habermas' reconfiguration of Kant is a switch in emphasis within the very formulations of the categorical imperative themselves. Instead of focusing on Kant's first two formulations—the universalizability principle or the treating of all rational agents as ends in themselves—the form and matter of the moral law as Kant sees them—Habermas actually elaborates on the third formulation, what Kant calls the **totality** of the moral law, the one that states that we ought

always to act in such a way that we see ourselves as legislating moral law for others, just as if we belonged to some kind of legislating body, in this case, a **universal** legislating body, the kingdom of ends. Not that the other two formulations aren't involved in discourse ethics—clearly they are—but what else could it mean to create the kingdom of ends but to consistently engage in parliamentary discussion in order to pass proper legislation? Habermas reinterprets Kant to mean that the heart of the ethical is found in its communicability and discursive possibilities. And Kierkegaard agrees. This is what the third problem in Fear and Trembling tackles.

The third problem asks the question: is it ethically right for Abraham not to talk about what he plans to do, with someone at least, especially with his wife and son, who are most material to the situation, and even with the community at large, since it affects them too. Shouldn't Abraham tell somebody what he plans to do? To ask them: what do you think? Should I do it? That Abraham doesn't at all, that he doesn't even seem to consider it, is deeply troubling. Given the seriousness of the situation, it would seem wise for Abraham to talk to someone, to get an outside perspective, to get the kinds of different points of view one would normally get in an open, discursive community.

Yet, what **can** Abraham say here? How would he go about fishing for advice about **this**? What could he possibly say? For the moment Abraham speaks, he expresses ethical doubts about the command given to him; therefore he does not suspend the ethical, nor is he squarely facing the new duty (or should we say "task" here?) God is imposing on him. Actually, to speak at all in this situation is to express the ethical. It would be, in some sense, to do what Habermas claims is the essence of the ethical—to ask questions, communicate interests, make claims,

provide arguments and reasons for one's claims, and to listen to others do the same. It would be to commit to a dialogue.

Abraham does not commit to a dialogue of any kind, but remains concealed. Kierkegaard asserts at the beginning of this third problem: "The ethical is as such the universal; as the universal it is in turn the disclosed." (109) Though Kierkegaard here speaks in terms of disclosure, and Habermas in terms of communicative action, dialogue, and discourse, I think Kierkegaard means something similar to Habermas, for clearly the reason why Abraham's concealment is a problem for the ethical is the fact that Abraham denies a voice to those who have a real stake in the matter. To disclose is to naturally invite dialogue and discourse—in this case, to invite imminent, sharp disagreement. As a result of his silence, Abraham does not allow Sarah, Isaac, or anyone else, to weigh in on the matter. He violates their autonomy. He treats the situation as if it were meant **for him alone**. Again, he seems to play the part of the recalcitrant sectarian.

But, the moment Abraham speaks, he translates...he translates the religious into the ethical thereby relinquishing any hold the religious might have on him, something liberal political theory enjoins him to do. This is exactly Habermas' task (and others like him, for example Rawls)—to show religion, and other sectarian groups, how to translate their interests and claims into universalistic philosophical language so that they too can join the global conversation.

Now, let's go back to the second problem in Fear and Trembling, the one that asks: do human beings have an absolute duty to God? This second problem is actually the most direct and readily apprehended one in Kierkegaard's work; the first and third are somewhat technical in nature. But it makes sense to discuss the teleological suspension of the ethical first, since the

question about whether one has an absolute duty to God is the one most easily misunderstood. I know plenty of people who would answer yes to this question, until you press them a bit. The world, it would seem, is not short on Euthyphros.

What Kierkegaard has to say on this second question is perhaps the most telling. His description of the conflict between the ethical and the religious, as well as what it means for the religious to suspend the ethical's authority, actually finds its clearest expression here in the discussion on what it means to have an absolute duty to God. I feel I need to quote Kierkegaard at length here:

The ethical is the universal and as such, in turn, the divine. It is therefore correct to say that all duty is ultimately duty to God; but if one cannot say more one says in effect that really I have no duty to God. The duty becomes duty to God by being referred to God, but I do not enter into relation with God in the duty itself. Thus it is a duty to love one's neighbor; it is a duty in so far as it is referred to God; yet it is not God that I come in relation to in the duty but the neighbor I love. If, in this connection, I then say that it is my duty to love God, I in fact only utter a tautology, in so far as 'God' is understood in an altogether abstract sense as the divine: i.e. the universal, i.e. duty. The whole of human existence is in that case entirely self-enclosed, as a sphere, and the ethical is at once the limit and completion. God becomes an invisible, vanishing point, an impotent thought, and his power is to be found only in the ethical, which fills all existence. (96)

There is much to comment on here. If the ethical is the binding reality for all human beings, is in fact the absolute, then it is in effect a reality that in no way brings human beings into **contact** with the divine. At best, one relates to the divine only by indirect reference to the divine, either practically while one performs the ethical, or theoretically as part of one's ethical system. But Kierkegaard makes it very clear—my duty is to my fellow human beings, not to God, if the ethical is the absolute. I may refer to God, either practically or theoretically, from time to time, but I am not to try to come into relation with God Himself. My I-Thou relationship exists only with other human beings (something Levinas would agree with, for example); it does not and cannot exist with God. Thus, God is pushed to the margins, becomes a theoretical limit of sorts,

“an invisible, vanishing point, an impotent thought.” The ethical, it would seem, as Kierkegaard thematizes it here, results in a kind of atheism, or, at best, a kind of limbo. There is plenty of dialogue and discourse in **this** world defined by the ethical, but none of it is about, in relation to, or oriented towards, God. On that, the ethical actually prefers, requires, silence. So there is Abraham’s silence, then there is this silence here.

Well, given Habermas’ primary thrust regarding the religious, and its contribution to ethical discourse, Kierkegaard and Habermas seem to be in agreement on the nature of the ethical and its relation to God and the religious. God, and the religious, play no necessary role in the conception of the ethical. The ethical is conceived as human-to-human relations. That’s it, at least primarily. If God has any role to play, it is as a concept translated in such a way as to further the dialogical relationships human beings are to have with each other.

One thing that needs to be said, at this point, about Abraham’s relationship to the ethical is that, regardless of how one construes the ethical, Abraham fails. Kierkegaard is quite clear about this. Look at it this way: no **utilitarian** good comes from his action; **deontologically**, Abraham clearly uses Isaac as a means for his own religious development and violates the second formulation of the moral law, as well as the other formulations; nor does Abraham’s action produce any **communal** good, exemplify any **virtue** (if ever an action were extreme, this is it!) or pursue anything that can be construed as part of the good life; finally, it also does not even fulfill the requirements of divine command theory, for if we say it does, then we have the uncomfortable position of saying God directly contradicts himself. We should add, in passing, that it is all too common for interpreters of Fear and Trembling to think that what it really advocates is a divine command theory, especially because of the second problem. But that cannot be maintained, since divine command theory is after all a theory of **ethics**, and

Kierkegaard makes it clear that Abraham acts in opposition to the ethical, either because he is a murderer, or because he is higher than the ethical. The religious and the ethical are not the same. If Abraham's drawing of the knife can legitimately be construed as a sacrifice, then he is still performing an action that is other than the ethical, even for divine command theory.

And yet, recall: for the religious to obtain, Abraham must express the ethical.

There is another issue here as well. Some people are puzzled, even offended, by Kierkegaard's choice of examples of the ethical in Fear and Trembling. Obviously, he chooses such examples because he is looking for comparisons with Abraham's story and sacrifice. Abraham's trial, after all, has every appearance of a tragedy, at least on the surface. Of course, it is not, and, as you may know, Kierkegaard spends a great deal of time discussing the tragic as a special expression of the ethical, where the sacrificer's action is validated because it is seen as something necessary to do, and necessary **as** a higher expression of the ethical, usually because it produces or affirms some good that is higher than the individual good—the state, the community, etc. Still, in spite of their tragic nature, the three stories Kierkegaard uses as comparisons to Abraham reveal sacrifices that are intelligible, explicable, fathomable. They may still offend us, but not in the same way that Abraham's action offends us. Thus, Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter for the well-being of his people, Jephthah must sacrifice his daughter for similar reasons, and Brutus must tragically put to death his sons, affirming the laws of his land by not exempting his sons from them, however tempting that might be to do as a father. Ethically, all three sacrifices can be justified, *in some sense*. We may find such actions distasteful, according to our modern liberal sympathies, but even we must admit the possibility that actions of this kind are required, from time to time. Consider what this country was prepared to do on 9/11 with Flight 93, if it were necessary. Or consider Churchill's decision at a crucial moment during

World War II to allow Coventry, England to be destroyed, without warning, so as not to alert the Germans that the British had cracked their code. There is even an interesting scenario in the recent remaking of the Battlestar Galactica saga, where, in order to save the human race, a number of human beings are left behind because their spaceships simply aren't fast enough, presumably leading to their destruction.

With all of these situations, some notion of the common good is seen as overriding the private good. How Habermas' theory confronts such situations is not entirely clear to me. Habermas strikes me as not able to deal well with tragedy, or as he might say, strategic actions of a tragic nature. To sacrifice another is not to consult that other; one denies their autonomy and chooses for them. One can include them in the discourse, in these cases, only by imagining what they might say if they could speak. Yet it seems possible to **imagine** a community discoursing over such difficult choices and coming to a consensus concerning them. This is not possible, however, with Abraham's situation.

Thus, to summarize: Kierkegaard thinks that if the religious exists, it teleologically suspends the ethical while not abrogating it, all in the endeavor to fulfill its absolute duty to God, seeing that, in fulfilling that absolute duty, it is required to remain silent, or, perhaps more accurately, the religious naturally **engenders** silence. From the religious perspective, Kierkegaard seems to agree with Habermas' ethical perspective. The authentically religious has nothing universalistic about it. **And** they both seem to agree that the ethical naturally tends towards a needlessness of God.

We must notice something crucial here however, as we move into the final phase of the paper: Abraham's action cannot be described as religiously **sectarian**. Habermas normally construes the religious as sectarian, as the most typical example of groups with interests that are

not universalizable, but have only sharply particularized interests. This is Habermas' primary criticism of religious positions—they are ideological in nature, rather than communicatively and discursively rational.

Thus, Habermas thinks the religious should not speak because they do not employ the right **sort** of language. Their language is loaded with particular values and claims. They cannot engage in rational discourse at a properly abstract level. Nor does religion recognize the human as its proper authority. It takes a particular Scripture or Revelation as its proper authority. However, Kierkegaard thinks the religious cannot speak, not because it is too sectarian, but because it is too **solitary**. Habermas thinks the religious fails to meet the requirements of discourse ethics—it speaks, but in a self-interested, particularized, sectarian manner.

Kierkegaard sees the religious as **unable** to speak, because what it has to say it cannot say except within the silences of the absolute. Maybe it can speak in the form of prayer, but not in the form of human-to-human dialogue. It is caught in the grip of an I-Thou relation with God, not with other human beings. It is always solitary, a task designated for the singular individual, in “absolute isolation.” (106) The religious never forms **groups**; it can't, **constitutionally**.

Kierkegaard does raise the issue of sectarianism in Fear and Trembling. In Problem II, he mentions those who, in their paltry attempts to acquire the knighthood of faith, join ranks, thinking that such joining together will facilitate acquisition of faith. He describes them as “cheaters,” who “deafen each other with their clang and clatter.” (107) They are false representatives of the religious, and more akin to the aesthetic than to the religious, not to be taken seriously. But it is interesting that both Kierkegaard and Habermas see the religiously sectarian as invalid, Kierkegaard because the sectarian does not see the **religious** correctly; Habermas because the religious sees itself as a universal that it cannot be, that is, it fails to

understand the nature of the **ethical**. (In a certain sense, this is obviously true for Kierkegaard too.) These two vantages on the sectarian strike me as saying the same thing, but from two different angles.

There are a couple of related, and quite interesting, stand alone questions that we cannot explore here, but let's just ask them anyway, for the sake of reflection. Given what we have argued thus far about the religious and its non-universalistic nature, how ought we to see **liturgy**? How ought we to see **Scripture**? Both are public forms of religious communication. Yet both also appear to aim at the individual. Perhaps what we see with each of them is the proper **synthesis** of the individual and the social, where individuals, in solitude, confront the absolute...**together**?

Well, back to our topic at hand. So neither Kierkegaard nor Habermas thinks the religious is authentically expressed in the form of a partisan group. Yet, that is exactly how the religious is typically expressed, as we all know. In fact, religion today is more fragmented and fractured than ever before, divided into sects and denominations of all kinds. As a result, as Habermas and other liberal theorists argue, religion nearly always has a fragmenting and fracturing effect on public discourse. These religious sects believe that they too have a legitimate voice in public discourse, a voice that deserves to be heard, a vote that should be counted in the democratic polling of things. And many want more than that, believing that their position is the true universal, striving oftentimes quite desperately to impose it on others, something that both Habermas and Kierkegaard argue against in their respective positions.

What I am leading up to is this: the pragmatic spheres of ethics and politics are all about making **claims**, claims that one tries to exercise and justify in public, to get others to come to one's side, to get others to agree with one's own position. We think this way because, as

Habermas argues, it is built into the very structures and pragmatic dynamics of language use. In other words, public discourse is **inherently normative**. This involves the assertion of rights—claims of justice that we want others to recognize—and it seems to be human nature oftentimes to assert rights without seeing the complementary responsibilities that go along with those rights. But it is important to see how fundamental claim-making is, not only in our culture, but many other cultures, perhaps even in all cultures. And this claim making is an odd mix of private, partisan, and universal sensibilities—i.e., I deserve x because x is mine, or because I am a member of y group, or because I am a human being. The lattermost of course is the universal at work in us. And for Habermas, to be normatively involved in ethical discourse, to assert and argue for claims of our own, entails too that we listen to the claims of others. For we might be wrong in our claims. But that is precisely what it means to discourse and dialogue. This is what it means to be ethical, in Habermas’ sense.

Abraham has a claim. His claim is—Isaac is my son. I am Isaac’s father. **I am a father** and I deserve to have a son, this son, my son of promise. One can easily imagine the host of arguments Abraham could bring to bear against anyone who might suggest that he sacrifice this beloved, yet much deserved, son of his. Including a God. Arguments from a personal perspective, from a father’s perspective, from a human perspective, from the special perspective of one who has formed a unique social contract with his God. And likely there are others. But think of the thick set of claims Abraham can legitimately make against God’s command to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham has every right to turn God down. It is his **ethical** right.

Indeed, this is what a tragic or ethical hero would have done. Looking again at the tragically ethical heroes Kierkegaard looks at in Fear and Trembling, a tragic hero is still an ethical person, in Kierkegaard’s mind, only because they have resort to a higher expression of

the universal. Sacrifice of the kind Kierkegaard examines in Fear and Trembling can only find justification if it has some higher good to achieve. After all, Agamemnon does not turn his god down. His god also demands a sacrifice. But the reason why figures like Agamemnon are not Abrahams is, once again, due to some understandable greater good their sacrifice effects. Nevertheless, the reason why tragic figures, though ethical, are still tragic is that their sacrifice is for the sake of a claim that cancels their own individual claim. But they make up for that sacrifice by gaining a greater good on the other end of things.

As a result, Kierkegaard notices something quite amazing about such tragic, ethical figures—they become **resigned** figures as well. They cease to **care** about, or at least they seem to care **less for**, the person they must sacrifice. It is as if the only way they can go through with the sacrifice is by no longer caring for them, by becoming stoically indifferent to the whole situation. This is how Kierkegaard characterizes all the tragic figures he examines in Fear and Trembling.

This is precisely what one scholar, Edward Mooney, argues. He argues that the primary difference between Abraham, the knight of faith, and a tragic hero, or knight of infinite resignation, is that with the latter “care as well as claim is **renounced**” in the very act of sacrifice, whereas with Abraham “he sees or knows in his bones that renouncing all **claims** on the finite is not renouncing all **care** for it.” (54) In fact, this is what Abraham learns from, and through, his trial. God is teaching him to relinquish all claims—as a father, a human being, a founder of a people, etc—but not by ceasing to care for those things. Actually, his care is to increase. That is what is behind God’s command to sacrifice. Abraham is to relinquish, without resigning.

But oddly enough, what do we see with the ethical? It would seem the ethical is all about making claims, yet, it would also seem that with the ethical, **care wanes with the exercise of claim**. It is what enables Agamemnon, for example, to go through with the sacrifice of Iphigeneia—in order to sacrifice her he must care less for her, distance himself from her. **His care for her is so bound up with his claim on her that once he must relinquish that claim, for the sake of a higher expression of the ethical, he naturally also surrenders some of his care for her**. His love is inextricably tied up with his sense of justice. He loves Iphigeneia precisely because she is **his**. His sense of responsibility is completely bound up with **her**, such that feeling some obligation also makes him feel **entitled** to some sort of claim as well. Thus, if one of the ethical's values is justice, and justice is about boundaries and limits, as Plato informs us, then injustice is a violation of some boundary. It is a violation of a legitimate claim. Only, it would seem now, that learning how to make and exercise and make good on claims does **not** also teach us how to care.

But this is precisely the problem as Habermas sees it, only he couches matters in terms of **justice**, on the one hand, and **solidarity**, on the other. Habermas argues that the two **goals** of moral discourse are justice and solidarity. Habermas says: “The first postulates equal respect and equal rights for the individual, whereas the second postulates empathy and concern for the well-being of one's neighbor.” (MCCA 200) The two are in constant tension. Justice has to do with claims, solidarity with care. And whenever we exercise a claim against someone, it becomes quite difficult to care; or if we exercise a claim in favor of someone, we come to care “too much.” Perhaps this is why tolerance is the great virtue of modern, liberal democracy; and jealousy such a universal human trait.

But now we can perhaps see the connection between Habermas and Kierkegaard. If Mooney is right, and faith is a relation that teaches us how to renounce claim without abandoning care along with it, then we can start to see how the religious ought to express itself in public discourse without speaking.

Kierkegaard's insights into the nature of the religious help us make sense of the relationship between the religious and the ethical, for what he asserts in Fear and Trembling is that what Abraham is sacrificing is not just Isaac, but **his ethical relation with Isaac**. As he says, "the temptation is the ethical itself." (88) Abraham is not just sacrificing Isaac, he is also sacrificing his ethical nature, his ethical relationship with Isaac. From the ethical's perspective, what Abraham is giving up is the very thing that is supposed to save him—his ethical character, his moral substance, his obligatory, loving relationships with other human beings.

Thus, what Kierkegaard means for the reader to think when he talks of Abraham's sacrifice is to bracket [Abraham's ethical relation with Isaac], that is, the reader must **bracket that** when he imagines Abraham drawing the knife. By commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son, the son he **loves**, without any evident ethical telos to fulfill, God separates the love Abraham feels for Isaac from the ethical claim he naturally wants to exercise with respect to Isaac. If Abraham were to balk at the command, it is only because his sense of justice has been affronted. That he doesn't, says something else about Abraham.

Thus, there is a huge difference between sectarian religion exercising political claims in public, and the nature of the authentic religious in Kierkegaard, silent when it comes to exercising claims, in fact actually relinquishing those claims without at all giving up on solidarity with the person the ethical claim targets, regardless of the **way** it targets them. What this amounts to is a kind of suffering. Yet, after all, isn't that what the essence of the religious

is—to suffer? And to love? It can make claims, but in silence. And, like Abraham, it can hope eternally to receive those claims back, just as Abraham receives Isaac back, now in complete joy and grace, and not because God, or some other subject, has respected some ethical claim of his. I suppose suffering itself **is** an argument. Silence, in fact, might very well be an argument. Think, for example, of Christ's silence in the midst of the Grand Inquisitor's invective. Why does Dostoevsky have Christ remain so silent? Is it possible that Christ's silence can be construed as an argument? Or, to use another example from the The Brothers Karamazov: the elder monk Zosima tells the story of the mysterious visitor who confesses to him of a murder he committed years earlier. Zosima finally convinces the man to confess publicly, and if you remember, no one believes the man. The community thinks he has gone mad, and it blames Zosima instead for the man's strange behavior in his final days. However, Zosima remains silent, receiving the undeserved blame happily. He has a claim, against the man himself and his community, but he does not exercise it. And he feels joy over this.

Therefore, we can see that Habermas and Kierkegaard agree, in some of their conclusions at least, though they arrive by different routes. Habermas sees religiousness as inherently sectarian, therefore unethical; Kierkegaard sees the religious as inherently solitary, and opposed to the ethical only because the ethical is limited in how well it can get us to care for (or against) that which we exercise some sort of claim. The authentically religious then expresses its solidarity with others, even when, or perhaps especially when, its sense of justice is violated. It sacrifices that sense of justice. And in doing so, it may very well get it back.

A final remark. If there is something to this notion that the religious equals continuing to care, simultaneous to renouncing all claim, then the ramifications for the problem of suffering are profound. Perhaps this insight about the religious relationship between care and claim

provides the best basis for **any** theodicy—to continue to love, even when one has absolutely no good **reason** to. In Leszek Kolakowski’s simply put words: “God owes us nothing.” In other words, no ethical justification of suffering is possible. Kierkegaard, at the end of Either/Or: II, argues for the thesis that “in relation to God we human beings are always in the wrong.” If that is the case, how we exercise claims against one another is thrown into radical doubt. A radical suspension, if you will. And how we suffer, how we care for one another, are one and the same task, or trial.

**5 Between Care and Claim: Comments on Michael Carper's *Can the Religious Person Say Anything?***

*Laurence Rohrer*

Michael Carper's paper, *Can the Religious Person Say Anything?* very beautifully accomplishes what it sets out to do, namely it delineates the very real tension between public moral discourse and religious discourse that is commonly misunderstood. Michael's contrast of Kierkegaard and Habermas is largely effective but I think imperfect in one respect. I am largely in agreement with the manner that Michael delineates the tension between faith and reason in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*. However, I think that the delineation of the tension of care and claim that Michael develops in the closing arguments of his paper does not work equally well in Habermas's communicative theory of ethics, because I do not think that Habermas understands the categories of the ethical and the religious as similarly to Kierkegaard, as Michael sometimes suggests.

Michael has convinced me that in various parts of their discourses, Kierkegaard and Habermas seem to be making similar claims about the both the religious and the ethical, but I think that he underestimates the force of the very real differences between both writers, that he himself addresses in his discussion of the ethical as Kierkegaard understood it, and the demands of public moral consensus demanded by Habermas.

Michael discusses the fact that Kant profoundly influences Kierkegaard understanding of the ethical. I would also add that Hegel's famous explication of *Antigone* which contrasts the divine law of the family i.e. tribe, with the law of the state, is very much at play in Kierkegaard's dialectic as well. Like Hegel, Kierkegaard argues that the two laws must at times clash.<sup>1</sup> But unlike Hegel, Kierkegaard does not trivialize the divine law of the family as the beliefs of the

primitive ethical community which must eventually dissolve into the higher synthesis of the law of the state. I bring this point about Hegel into my response, simply because I believe that this Hegelian understanding of the law of the family, “stemming from the underworld of the unconscious” is precisely the kind of attitude held by Habermas regarding religion in general, in that its focus is self-transcendence, involving sectarian claims. Just as there is no way that Antigone can excuse herself before the law, there is no way for the sectarian to justify herself before the public without meeting the ethical expectations of the laws of the state (qua the Ethical), which at times differ from the law of the family. The Hegelian view is not the position that Kierkegaard took however. The ethical and the religious must both remain valid, and the higher synthesis, if any is possible for both care and claim must retain the entire former properties of both the ethical and the religious. The Knight of Faith must remain suspended like the dancer as Kierkegaard so poetically put it. Thus, I agree with Michael that if we accept Kierkegaard’s presuppositions about the categories of the ethical and the religious that something akin to Michael’s own remarks about suffering and love perhaps pose the only partial solution.

In contrast, the reasons that Habermas holds, to explain why the religious cannot speak to the public implies strikingly different things. For Habermas, the religious when speaking in religious terms, is operating under a form of practical rationality (to borrow an expression from MacIntyre) that is not acceptable to the liberal expectations of ethical discourse, which as Michael points out, aims at some sort of reflective equilibrium that emerges from public discourse. The difference between the attitudes of Kierkegaard and Habermas towards the religious is clear. For Kierkegaard the genuinely faithful must hold onto the antinomy of the two valid categories, precisely because both are valid, but for Habermas the religious can contribute nothing qua religious *because* he believes their form of practical rationality is *invalid*.

Unlike Hegel who believed that the higher synthesis of the state represented the fruition of the Weltgeist in which some of the prior categories would be retained – there is no higher category other than the public ethical discourse itself for Habermas. Thus, the religious person is forced into bad faith at every juncture they wish to enter public discourse. He must entertain and negotiate with the positions of those that hold views that may clearly contradict his own. In short, the religious must cease to be religious and act as a secular liberal in order to say anything at all. Thus, while it may seem that Abraham's position in *Fear and Trembling*, appears to be analogous to the religious sectarian that concerns Habermas, as Michael suggests in his discussion of Finlayson's interpretation, he is not. Abraham must remain in the tension between God and the Ethical in order to remain in the Truth, as the Knight of Faith. The sectarian on the other hand, as Habermas believes, fails to understand the ethical at all, precisely because he remains religious.

## 6 Reformed Epistemology, Clairvoyance, and the Role of Evidence

*Andrew Moon*

### Introduction

Good afternoon! It is good to be here at Lincoln University to share ideas and discuss philosophy with you all. I am thankful to Bruce Ballard for inviting me here, and I am also thankful to Dr. Jeffrey Freelin for taking the time to read my work and give me feedback. I also look forward to the interaction we will have together in this room during the question and answer period.

The subject of my paper is the rationality of belief in God, and I aim to both explain and defend an approach to this topic, an approach that is sometimes called *reformed epistemology*; this approach defends the rationality of belief in God apart from its being based on any argument or evidence. In this paper, I will defend two claims:

RE1: Belief in God *can* be rational even if it's not based on any argument or evidence.

RE2: There is no good argument that many people's belief in God is *not* rational apart from their having a reason to not believe that God exists.

My paper will be split into two parts. In Part I, I defend RE1 and RE2. Second, I will briefly present an objection to RE2 that has to do with clairvoyance, present my response to that objection, and end with some notes about the role that I think evidence can play for the rationality of theistic belief.

### Part I

#### *Cases*

I will start with a little bit of autobiography. When I was in eighth grade, I was at a little summer church retreat. During one of the evening services, as the preacher preached, I started to feel a

pull from something, from someone. Inside of me, I had this sense that God wanted me to follow him with my life. I think that's one of religious experience. the first times I can say that I had something like a

Consider the story of C.S. Lewis:

You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.

Or consider Alvin Plantinga:

There has been only one other occasion on which I felt the presence of God with as much immediacy and strength. That was when I once foolishly went hiking alone off-trail in really rugged country south of Mt. Shuksan in the North Cascades, getting lost when rain, snow and fog obscured all the peaks and landmarks. That night, while shivering under a stunted tree in a cold mixture of rain and snow, I felt as close to God as I ever have, before or since. I wasn't clear as to his intentions for me, and I wasn't sure I approved of what I thought his intentions might be... but I felt very close to him; his presence was enormously palpable.

(52)

These are instances where people report a *sense of the divine*, a sense that God is calling them or helping them or is simply with them. Reports of *experiences of God* are not uncommon. In his defense of the view that religious experience can be evidence for God's existence in the book *Perceiving God*, William Alston presents and analyzes a number of different religious experiences, citing a study that 75% of Christians take themselves to have had a religious

experience at some point in their lives. And in these circumstances, people find themselves with the deep conviction and belief that God exists.

### *Proper Basicity*

This is all good, but what should we say about the *rationality* or *reasonability* of these beliefs? Should we shake them off as we would do when any other stray hunch or idea comes into our mind? After all, these beliefs are not based on solid scientific reasoning or careful philosophical argument. And if we have no good argument for the truth of these beliefs, then should we not reject them?

Let us look at these questions more carefully. One might say the following:

- i) If a belief is not based on a good argument (scientific or philosophical), then it is irrational and should be rejected.
- ii) Belief in God in the above cases is not based on good argument (scientific or philosophical).
- iii) Therefore, belief in God in the above cases is irrational and should be rejected.

This argument has one good thing about it; it has what logicians call *validity*, meaning that if the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true. The question, then, is whether the premises are true. I will not dispute premise ii; I do not think that belief in God, in the above cases, is formed on the basis of any argument, either scientific or philosopher. So the premise I will question is premise i. What should we say about it?

I have two criticisms of it. First, if (i) is true, then one can have a rational belief only if the belief is held on the basis of an argument. But, clearly, one must believe the premises of this argument *rationally* if the conclusion is to be believed rationally. By (i), a premise can be believed rationally only if *it* is based on a further argument. But how can we rationally believe

the premises of *that* argument? Well, we'd need further arguments for them. We obviously cannot do this forever. It seems that there must be some things that we can rationally believe, even if we do not believe them on the basis of a further argument. Following Alvin Plantinga, call a *basic* belief any belief that is not held on the basis of other beliefs, and a *properly basic* belief any belief that is both basic and rational. It seems that some beliefs must be properly basic.

Moreover, it seems that there are obvious candidates for such beliefs. Take the belief that *I exist*; each of you believe this for yourselves. Yet, you do not believe this on the *basis* of any argument. Here's another example: when each of you walked into this room, you believed that there were chairs in the room. You did not *reason* to this conclusion; you just believed it. Or consider the fact that you all probably believe that the person sitting nearest to you has a mind: thoughts, feelings and so forth. Again, you did not believe this on the basis of a scientific argument; you just found yourself with this rational belief. Many beliefs are properly basic; hence, we should conclude that premise 1 is false.

And here is where Plantinga asked the startling question: "Why can't belief in God be properly basic?" Perhaps the beliefs in the above cases I mentioned are properly basic. And given the failure of the above argument, RE1 seems plausible to me:

RE1: Belief in God *can* be rational even if it's not based on any argument or evidence. Nothing in principle rules out belief in God from being rational even if it is not based on argument or evidence.

### *Rationality*

So, beliefs, including the belief in God, *can* be rational even if they are not based on an argument. But *are* theistic beliefs rational? Are they, in some cases, properly basic? Sure, we

have seen that a belief's not being based on an argument does not automatically deem it to be irrational, but there are many basic beliefs that are irrational.

Consider the following cases of irrational belief:

A man suddenly finds himself believing that the speaker at the conference he is attending is in fact a mass murderer. He just has this intuition that this is true. He has no solid evidence for this claim; his belief is in fact produced in him by his schizophrenia.

An Elvis-lover suddenly finds herself with the strong sense and conviction that Elvis is still alive. She deeply adores Elvis and longs to see him again. Unfortunately, she has no solid evidence for this claim; her belief is in fact produced in her by a self-defense mechanism that is aimed at protecting her from the pain of never seeing Elvis again.

There are basic beliefs – the beliefs that *I exist, there are chairs around me, other people have minds, thoughts, and feelings* – that seem proper and rational to hold, and there are other basic beliefs – the belief that *the speaker is a mass murderer* and *Elvis is alive* – that seem improper and irrational. Which category do theistic beliefs belong to?

To answer this, it would be helpful to have a theory of rationality. In 1993, Alvin Plantinga defended his *proper function* theory of rationality. It contains two key conditions, a *proper function* condition and a *truth-aim* condition. Plantinga thinks,

A belief is rational only if it is produced by cognitive mechanisms that 1) are properly functioning and 2) are truth-aimed.<sup>4</sup>

The belief that *that man is a mass murderer* is not produced by properly functioning cognitive mechanisms but by disordered ones, those that have been marred by schizophrenia.

The Elvis-lover's belief *might* be produced by a properly functioning defense mechanism, but it

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<sup>4</sup> Two brief notes: first, Plantinga is actually concerned about warrant, and second, he thinks more conditions than the two I just mentioned are necessary for warrant. For this undergraduate presentation, I can overlook these two points.

would be a mechanism aimed at giving her belief that contributes to her relief from pain, not a belief that is true. In contrast, my belief that *there are chairs in this room* is produced by properly functioning, truth-aimed perceptual mechanisms. My eyes, occipital lobes, and the various cognitive mechanisms in my brain, which are responsible for my belief that *there is a chair*, are all formed by faculties designed to give me accurate beliefs about the world. Plantinga defended his proper function theory in 1993 and in this 1996 volume, *Warrant in Contemporary Epistemology*, where he defends or responds to comments and objections from twelve prominent contemporary epistemologists.

How does this apply to belief in God in the above scenarios? Is belief in God produced by properly functioning, truth-aimed cognitive mechanisms? In 2000, Plantinga published his book *Warranted Christian Belief* where he defends the following two claims:

- 1) If God exists, then belief in God is probably rational.
- 2) If God does not exist, then the belief in God is probably not rational.

In defense of (2), suppose God does not exist. Then we should think of the faculties producing those theistic beliefs as purely the result of some naturalistic, evolutionary process. The aim of the faculties producing theistic belief might be aimed merely at producing beliefs that will help us cope with life and get through the day; they would not be aimed at producing true beliefs. So, such beliefs would not be rational; they'd be like the woman's belief that *Elvis is alive*.

In defense of (1), suppose God does exist. If so, then God is the ultimate designer and creator of human beings. God could have done this in a number of ways; he might have used evolutionary processes or some other processes; the point is that *if* God exists, then it seems unlikely that the theistic beliefs that are so prominent among human beings would not have been part of God's design plan.

What follows from this? Let us return to one of the main theses I wish to defend:

RE2: There is no good argument that many people's belief in God is *not* rational apart from their having a reason to not believe that God exists.

Some would like to say that belief in God is just a result of wishful thinking or a spandrel of evolution or so on. Many prominent atheists make this charge. But we can now see that all of these claims hinge on the assumption that God does not exist. For if God *does* exist, then God is probably the ultimate designer and source of these cognitive faculties. If so, then belief in God is rational. So, I think that we have good reason to accept RE2.

I will end Part II by dealing with an objection. Some have said that reformed epistemology makes theists close-minded to objections to theism. But note the importance of the clause, "apart from their having a reason to not believe that God exists". In other words, the theist cannot rationally believe that God exists if she has what epistemologists call a *defeater* for her theistic belief. Suppose a theist is confronted with the problem of evil; she finds herself now with a reason to not believe in God. If she thereby gains a defeater for her belief in God, then she also gains reason to think that the antecedent of (2) is met. This in turn gives her reason to think that belief in God is irrational. This is why reformed epistemologists like Plantinga and Alston have spent so much time responding to the problem of evil. My point here is simply to note that embracing reformed epistemology does not make one closed off to objections to theism. Negative evidence, in the form of defeaters, should be and are taken very seriously by reformed epistemologists.

## Part II

### *Argument Against RE2*

I now present an argument against RE2. First, consider the following famous example by Laurence Bonjour:

Norman, under conditions which usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant... He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the thesis that he possesses it. One day Norman comes to believe that the President is in New York City, though he has no evidence either for or against this belief. In fact, the belief is true, and results from his clairvoyant power under circumstances in which it is completely reliable.

Consider things from Norman's perspective. Since he has no idea that his belief that *the president is in New York* is formed by a reliable clairvoyant faculty, its formation should seem to him as random and out-of-the-blue as the suddenly formed belief that *a star just went nova a million miles away* or that *there are an even number of ducks*. It seems that such beliefs, including the one formed by Norman's reliable clairvoyance, are irrational. Furthermore, Bonjour specifically intends for his case to be one where Norman has no defeater for his belief that the president is in New York.

We can use Bonjour's example but substitute Plantinga's conditions:

*Adult Theism*: Sally is an adult whom God has designed with a *sensus divinitatus*, a faculty designed to form beliefs about God. One day, her faculty activates and triggers the formation of the belief that *there is a God who loves me*, though she has no evidence for or against this belief.

Sally's belief was formed by properly functioning, truth-aimed faculties; she thereby meets Plantinga's conditions for rationality. And here is a potential problem for Plantinga. In the same way that Norman's belief is irrational, Sally's belief also seems irrational. The formation of the belief that *there is a God who loves me* should seem as random and out-of-the-

blue as Norman's belief that the president is in New York. This gives us reason to think that Plantinga's theory of rationality is false and that more is required for rational theistic belief. I will formulate the argument as follows:

- 1) Norman's situation is analogous in all relevant ways to Sally's situation.
- 2) Norman's belief is irrational.
- 3) If (1) and (2), then Sally's belief is irrational.
- 4) Therefore, Sally's belief is irrational.
- 5) If (4), then RE2 is false.
- 6) Therefore, RE2 is false.

*Response to Argument Against RE2*

I will dispute either (1) or (5) (or both).

First, I will say why I think that Norman's belief is irrational. Any ordinary human, upon suddenly believing that the president is in New York, should reason in something like the following way.

Monologue 1: "The president is in New York? I don't have the ability to know *that*.

There are some things that I and other human beings have the power to know, and this isn't one of them."

Upon reasoning in this way, that Norman has a defeater for his belief that the president is in New York. So, it seems to me that the reason that Norman's belief is irrational is because he has a defeater for his belief.

Does Sally also have a defeater like Norman does? Is it the case that Sally should reason in the way of Monologue1? Should she reason as follows?

Monologue2: “There is a God who loves me? I don’t have the ability to know *that*.

There are some things that I and other human beings have the power to know, and this isn’t one of them.”

Whether Sally should reason in this way depends on what Sally rationally believes about the powers of human beings. I see two options (and a spectrum of options in between).

Suppose that Sally grew up in a society where many people reported experiences of God or times when they sensed that God was near them. If that is the case, then Sally would have evidence for the existence of something like a *sensus divinitatus*. And then she shouldn’t reason in accord with Monologue2. So, it seems to me that premise (1) is false. The scenarios are not relevantly analogous.

On the other hand, suppose that Sally grew up in a society where nobody ever reported an experience of God. Then, if Sally were to find herself believing in God, I think that she should reason as in Monologue2. I think that she would have a defeater. And in that case, Sally’s belief would be irrational.

But now, I would question whether (5) is true. It is true that Sally’s belief would be irrational in such a case, but that would be a case in which she has a defeater. And then we can see that this does not count against RE; RE allows that defeaters could make theistic belief irrational. So, regardless of how we interpret Sally’s case, the argument fails to count against RE.

Now, as a final note, it is interesting to ask what the actual state of affairs is regarding the existence of religious experiences or the existence of a *sensus divinitatus*. That there are religious experiences all throughout the world is obvious. But it is also worth noting that, in the last decade or so, cognitive scientists of religion have amassed very interesting data pointing to

an innate tendency in human beings to believe in God. For example, Justin Barrett, in his excellent 2004 book, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?*, amasses data from his own scientific work and others in order to argue that there is a natural disposition in human beings to believe in God. From what I can gather, this is a general consensus among cognitive scientists of religion, both theists and atheists. So, scientifically informed folk will not have the sort of defeater that Sally has. So, we have reason to think that the state of most scientifically informed adults today will not be like that of Norman the clairvoyant.

### *Evidence*

I'll make a final remark on the role that evidence can play in the theist's life. First, I already mentioned above how defeaters can make it irrational to believe in God; theists should take potential defeaters seriously. Second, it is worth remembering that one could come to rationally believe in God on the basis of arguments. Those who do not find themselves with a basic belief in God (via a religious experience) will find this valuable. This was the case for Antony Flew, who came to believe in God on the basis of a design argument toward the end of his life. These arguments could also provide extra support for those who already do believe in God in a basic way. Lastly, positive arguments could help counterbalance the arguments against God's existence; they could nullify the effect of potential defeaters. So, I hope it is clear that reformed epistemologists like myself can and do take evidence seriously.

## 7 Comments on Andrew Moon's *Reformed Epistemology, Clairvoyance, and the Role of Evidence*

*Katy Hawkins*

Thanks to Andrew Moon for his excellent presentation. I would like to consider briefly Dr. Moon's two central claims, RE1 and RE2. First, RE1 proposes the following: "Belief in God can be rational even if it's not based on any argument or evidence." In support of this claim, Dr. Moon presents several cases (from his own life, and from the lives of C.S. Lewis and Alvin Plantinga) to show that an experience of God's presence or calling in a person's life can produce a belief that God exists – a belief that is rational or reasonable – even if it is not based on any evidence.

First, one might wonder exactly how we are to understand the terms *rationality* and *reasonability* when evidence, reasons, and arguments are not essential parts of the definition. Dr. Moon presents Alvin Plantinga's theory of rationality. According to Plantinga's criteria, a belief is rational if produced by cognitive mechanisms that are (1) properly functioning and (2) truth-aimed. However, as Dr. Moon has used these terms, it is not clear to me that this definition of rationality clearly avoids a dependence upon evidence and reasons (nor is it clear why it would be desirable for the definition of these terms to avoid dependence upon evidence). In considering (1) and (2), it seems the first thing we would want to know is how to determine whether cognitive mechanisms *are* functioning properly. This seems impossible apart from evaluating the way those who possess the cognitive mechanisms in question handle evidence they encounter. In fact, this seems to be exactly the kind of evaluation Dr. Moon gives when he contrasts cases of rational and irrational basic beliefs. In the case of the man who believes the conference speaker is a mass murderer, we see that the man's schizophrenia is preventing him

from considering the evidence properly. Likewise, we see that the Elvis-lover fails to consider the evidence carefully because of her overriding desire to believe that Elvis is alive. Dr. Moon contrasts these two examples of irrational belief with the belief that *there are chairs in the room*. So, why is this belief rational? What makes it different? According to Dr. Moon, it is rational because “my eyes, occipital lobes, and the various cognitive mechanisms in my brain, which are responsible for my belief that there is a chair, are all formed by faculties designed to give me accurate beliefs about the world.” But why think this is true? To support this claim, one might offer reasons to think that these mechanisms *are* designed to produce accurate beliefs about the world. It seems, then, that Plantinga’s two conditions of rational belief—that the belief is produced by faculties that are functioning properly and aimed at truth—both seem dependent upon evidence and reasons.

This leads to a second question: What counts as an argument? What counts as evidence? Precise definitions of these terms might help to clarify the claim of RE1: “Belief in God can be rational even if it’s not based on any argument or evidence.” Suppose someone contends that religious experience may function as a type of evidence. Would this change the claim of RE1? That is, could an awareness of the presence of God or a sense of the divine be taken as a kind of evidence—even if of a personal or incommunicable sort? Granted, this type of evidence may not be as strong as other types of evidence that might be readily accessible to anyone. However, those who consider an experience of God’s presence to be of *potential* evidential value might argue that if God exists and what the Bible says to represent God’s nature is true, then it seems that we have reason to expect God to reveal himself to his children in various ways – not excluding by means of an experience of his presence.

I also want to raise a question regarding the second central claim, RE2. RE2 states, “There is no good argument that many people’s belief in God is not rational apart from their having a reason to not believe that God exists.” My concern is that, according to this claim, a belief X is rational as long as one does not have a defeater (a reason to think that belief X is false). This seems strange. Consider any case of two competing, mutually exclusive conclusions (call them X and Y). If Tom has no evidence one way or another, would Tom be rational to believe X and reject Y? Would it not be more responsible to suspend judgment in the absence of a reason to favor one conclusion over another? This seems especially clear in the case of Norman the clairvoyant. Dr. Moon argues that Norman’s belief is irrational because he has a defeater for his belief. According to Moon, the defeater is that Norman thinks humans do not have the mysterious power to know things like “The president is in New York.” But perhaps we would be more accurate to say that Norman’s belief is irrational because he has *no evidence* of any kind in support of the conclusion. In the absence of reason to endorse one conclusion over another, Norman should suspend judgment. Thus, on this interpretation, the fact that he had a defeater for his belief is *an additional reason* to think his belief is irrational.

Finally, I would agree that the case of Sally is different from the case of Norman. Sally *is* rational; however, contrary to Dr. Moon, I would argue that Sally’s belief that “there is a God who loves me” is rational *because of* her evidence. As Dr. Moon notes, Sally grew up in a society where many people reported experiences of God or times when they sensed that God was near. Regardless of whether these cases were in fact legitimate, it seems that Sally does have evidence from her experience for the existence of something like a sense of the divine that would count in favor of her belief.

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