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Religion in the Public Sphere: Cognitive Presuppositions for the “Public Use of Reason” by Religious and Secular Citizens¹

(1) Religious traditions and communities of faith have gained a new, hitherto unexpected political importance since the epoch-making historical juncture of 1989–90.² What initially spring to mind are, of course, the variants of religious fundamentalism that we encounter not only in the Middle East, but also in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. They are often associated with national and ethnic conflicts and also provide the seedbed for the decentralized terrorism that operates globally and is directed against the perceived insults and injuries inflicted by a superior Western civilization. But these are not the only symptoms.

¹ I am indebted for their insightful comments to Rainer Forst and Thomas M. Schmidt, both of whom have already published several instructive works on this topic. I am also grateful to Melissa Yates for helpful references and stimulating discussions.

² See Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999).

In Iran, for example, the protest against a corrupt regime set in place and supported by the West has given rise to a veritable theocracy that serves as a model for other movements. In several Muslim countries, and in Israel as well, religious family law has either replaced or represents an alternative to secular civil law. And in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, the validity of a more or less liberal constitution is conditional upon its compatibility with Sharia. Likewise, religious conflicts are forcing their way onto the international stage. The hopes associated with the political agenda of *multiple modernities* are fueled by the cultural self-confidence of those world religions that to this day indelibly mark the physiognomy of the major civilizations. And on the Western side of the fence, how international relations are perceived has changed in the light of fears of a “clash of civilizations” – “the axis of evil” is merely one prominent example of this. Even Western intellectuals who to date have remained self-critical in this respect are beginning to go on the offensive in responding to the Occidental image that others have formed of the West.³

Fundamentalism in other corners of the earth can be construed, among other things, as a long-term result of violent colonization and failed decolonization. Capitalist modernization that forcibly penetrates these societies from the outside under unfavorable conditions triggers social uncertainty and cultural upheavals. On this reading, religious movements must come to terms with the upheavals in social structure and cultural time-lags that individuals may experience as deracination under conditions of an accelerated or failing modernization. What is more surprising is the political revitalization of religion within the United States, where the dynamism of modernization has enjoyed the greatest success. Certainly, in Europe since the days of the French Revolution we have been aware of the power of a religious form of traditionalism that regarded itself as counter-revolutionary. However, this evocation of religion as the power of tradition implicitly revealed the nagging doubt that the vitality of what is merely passed down as tradition may have been broken. By contrast, the political

³ See Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

awakening of an undiminished religious consciousness in the United States seems to be unaffected by such doubts.

During the period since the end of World War II all European countries, with the exception of Ireland and Poland, have been gripped by a wave of secularization that goes hand in hand with modernization. For the United States, by contrast, all survey data indicate that the comparatively large proportion of devout and religiously active citizens has remained constant over the past six decades.⁴ More importantly, the current religious right in the United States is not traditionalist. It induces a sense of paralysis among its secular opponents precisely because it inspires spontaneous revivalist energies.

The movements for religious renewal at the heart of the civil society of the leading Western power are exacerbating at the *cultural* level the *political* division of the West prompted by the Iraq War.⁵ Among the divisive issues are the abolition of the death penalty, more or less liberal regulations on abortion, setting homosexual partnerships on a par with heterosexual marriages, an unconditional rejection of torture, and in general the prioritization of rights over collective goods such as national security. The European states now seem to be continuing alone along the path which, since the two constitutional revolutions of the late eighteenth century, they had pursued side by side with the United States. In the meantime, the significance of religions used for political ends has increased throughout the world. Against this background, the split within the West is perceived as though Europe were isolating itself from the rest of the world. Viewed in terms of world history, Max Weber's "Occidental Rationalism" now appears to be the actual deviation.

From this revisionist perspective, religious traditions appear to be sweeping away with undiminished strength the thresholds hitherto upheld between "traditional" and "modern" societies, or at least to be leveling them. The West's own image of modernity seems to be undergoing a gestalt switch as if in a psychological

⁴ See Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 4.

⁵ See Habermas, *The Divided West*, ed. and trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2006).

experiment: what was assumed to be the normal model for the future of all other cultures is suddenly becoming the exception. Even if this suggestive image of a gestalt switch will not stand up to closer sociological scrutiny and the explanations of secularization offered by modernization theory can be brought into line with the countervailing evidence,⁶ there can be no doubt concerning the evidence itself and above all concerning the symptomatic aggravation of the political mood.

Two days after the last US presidential elections, an essay appeared by a historian entitled "The Day the Enlightenment Went Out," which posed the alarmist question:

Can a people that believes more fervently in the Virgin Birth than in evolution still be called an Enlightened nation? America, the first real democracy in history, was a product of Enlightenment values . . . Though the founders differed on many things, they shared these values of what was then modernity . . . Respect for evidence seems not to pertain any more, when a poll taken just before the election showed that 75% of Mr. Bush's supporters believe Iraq either worked closely with Al Qaeda or was directly involved in the attacks of 9/11.⁷

However one evaluates the facts, the analyses of the election confirm that the cultural division of the West runs right through the American nation itself: conflicting value orientations – God, gays, and guns – have evidently eclipsed more concrete conflicts of interests. Be that as it may, President Bush owes his victory to

⁶ Norris and Inglehart (*Sacred and Secular*, ch. 10) defend the classical hypothesis that secularization prevails to the extent that a sense of "existential security" takes root together with improved economic and social conditions of life. Along with the demographic assumption that fertility rates decrease in developed societies, this hypothesis offers a preliminary explanation of why until now secularization has on the whole taken root only in the "West." The United States constitutes an exception, first, because the effects of its form of capitalism are less cushioned by a welfare state, so that its population is exposed to a higher average level of existential insecurity, and, second, because of its comparatively high rates of immigration from countries whose societies are still deeply shaped by tradition and whose fertility rates are correspondingly high.

⁷ Gary Wills, "The Day the Enlightenment Went Out," *New York Times*, November 4, 2004.

a coalition of primarily religiously motivated voters.⁸ This shift in the balance of political power points to a shift in mentality in civil society that also provides the backdrop for the academic debates on the political role of religion in the state and the public sphere.

Once again, the battle is over the substance of the first sentence of the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The United States was the political pacemaker on the path to establishing a freedom of religion that rests on mutual respect for the religious freedom of others.⁹ The marvelous Article 16 of the Bill of Rights of Virginia of 1776 is the first document that features a constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion that democratic citizens accord *one another* across the divides between the different religious communities. Unlike in France, the introduction of the freedom of religion in the United States did not mark a victory of laicism over a state authority that had at most tolerated religious minorities according to its own standards which it *imposed* on the population. Here, the secularization of state power did not have the primarily negative meaning of protecting citizens from being compelled to adopt a faith against their conscience. It was designed instead to guarantee the settlers who had turned their backs on Old Europe the positive liberty to exercise their respective religions without hindrance. For this reason, in the current American debate over the political role of religion, all sides can affirm their loyalty to

⁸ Laurie Goodstein and William Yardley, "President Bush Benefits from Efforts to Build a Coalition of Religious Voters," *New York Times*, November 5, 2004. Bush was elected by 60 per cent of the Spanish-speaking voters, 67 per cent of the white Protestants, and 78 per cent of the evangelical or born-again Christians. Even among the Catholics who otherwise vote Democrat, Bush was able to invert the traditional majorities to his advantage. The fact that the Catholic bishops sided with Bush is astonishing, notwithstanding the agreement on the abortion issue, if we bear in mind that the administration, in contrast to the Church, defends the death penalty and has put the lives of tens of thousands of US soldiers and Iraqi civilians at risk for a war of aggression that contravened international law and was based on flimsy reasons.

⁹ On this "respect concept" of tolerance, see the wide-ranging historical and systematically convincing study by Rainer Forst, *Toleranz im Konflikt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003).

the constitution. To what extent this claim is valid remains to be seen.

In what follows, I shall address the debate inspired by John Rawls's political theory, in particular his conception of the "public use of reason." How does the constitutional separation of state and church influence the role that religious traditions, communities, and organizations are permitted to play in civil society and the political public sphere, that is, in the political opinion- and will-formation of the citizens? Where, in the opinion of the revisionists, should the dividing line be drawn? Are the opponents who are currently on the warpath against the classical liberal conception of this division merely championing the pro-religious view that the secular state should remain neutral toward a *narrowly secularist* understanding of a pluralist society? Or are they changing the liberal agenda more or less imperceptibly from the ground up – and thus already arguing within the horizon of a *different* self-understanding of modernity?

First I would like to highlight the liberal premises of the constitutional state and the implications of John Rawls's conception of the public use of reason for the ethics of citizenship [*Ethos der Staatsbürger*] (2). Then I will turn to the most important objections to this rather restrictive idea of the political role of religion (3). Through a critical discussion of revisionist proposals that impinge upon the foundations of the liberal self-understanding, I will develop a conception that mediates between the two sides (4). Secular and devout citizens can fulfill the normative expectations of the liberal role of citizens, however, only if they likewise satisfy certain cognitive conditions and ascribe to each other the corresponding epistemic attitudes. I will offer a preliminary explanation of what this means by discussing the transformation of religious consciousness in response to the challenges of modernity (5). By contrast, the secular awareness that one is living in a postsecular society finds expression at the philosophical level in a postmetaphysical mode of thought (6). In both respects, however, the liberal state faces the problem that devout and secular citizens can acquire these attitudes only through complementary "learning processes," whose status as learning processes remains controversial, and over which the state cannot in any event exercise influence by the legal and political means at its disposal (7).

(2) The self-understanding of the constitutional state developed within the context of a philosophical tradition that relies on “natural” reason, in other words, that relies exclusively on public arguments that claim to be *equally accessible* to *all* persons. The assumption of a common human reason provides the epistemic basis for justifying a secular state that no longer depends on religious legitimation. And this in turn makes the separation between church and state possible at the institutional level. The overcoming of the early modern wars of religion and confessional disputes provided the historical backdrop against which the liberal conception emerged. The constitutional state responded by secularizing government and democratizing political power. This genealogy also forms the background to John Rawls’s *Theory of Justice*.¹⁰

The constitutional freedom of conscience and religion is the appropriate political response to the challenges of religious pluralism. For it makes it possible to defuse at the level of the social interactions among citizens the potential for conflict between the existentially relevant convictions of believers, members of other faiths, and nonbelievers, which remains undiminished at the cognitive level. Yet the secular character of the state is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for guaranteeing equal religious freedom for everybody. It is not enough to rely on the condescending indulgence of a secularized authority that comes to tolerate minorities who previously suffered discrimination. The parties *themselves* must come to an agreement on the precarious demarcations between the positive liberty to practice a religion of one’s own and the negative liberty to remain unencumbered by the religious practices of others. If the principle of tolerance is to be above the suspicion of defining the *limits* of tolerance in an oppressive manner, then compelling reasons must be found for the definition of what can still be tolerated and what cannot, reasons equally acceptable to all sides.¹¹ Fair arrangements can be found only if the parties involved also learn

¹⁰ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), §§33f.

¹¹ On the concept of tolerance as reciprocal respect, see Forst, *Toleranz im Konflikt*.

to adopt the perspectives of the others. The deliberative mode of democratic will-formation is the most appropriate for this purpose.

In the secular state, government must in any case be put on a nonreligious footing. The democratic constitution must fill the gap in legitimation opened up by a secularization that deprives the state of religious legitimation. The practice of constitution-making generates those basic rights that free and equal citizens must accord one another if they wish to regulate their coexistence reasonably and autonomously by means of positive law.¹² The democratic procedure owes its legitimizing power to two components: first, the equal political participation of all citizens, which ensures that the addressees of the laws can also understand themselves to be the authors of these laws; and, second, the epistemic dimension of a deliberation that grounds the presumption of rationally acceptable outcomes.¹³

These two legitimacy components explain the legally noncoercible political virtues that the liberal state must expect from its citizens. The conditions for the successful participation in the shared practice of democratic self-determination define the role of the citizen. In spite of their ongoing dissent over questions concerning worldviews and religious doctrines, citizens should respect one another as free and equal members of their political community. And, based on this civic solidarity, they should seek a rationally motivated agreement when it comes to contentious political issues – they owe one another good reasons. Rawls speaks in this context of the “duty of civility” and “the public use of reason”: “The ideal of citizenship imposes a moral, not a legal, duty – the duty of civility – to be able to explain to one another on those fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the values of public reason. This duty also involves a willingness to listen to

¹² See Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), ch. 3.

¹³ See Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” *University of Chicago Law Review* 64 (1997): 765–807, here p. 769: “Ideally citizens are to think of themselves as if they were legislators and ask themselves what statutes, supported by what reasons satisfying the principle of reciprocity, they would think it most reasonable to enact.”

others and a fair-mindedness in deciding when accommodations to their views should reasonably be made.”¹⁴

Only with the emergence of a self-governing association of free and equal citizens founded on legal norms does the point of reference arise for the use of public reason which requires citizens to justify their political statements and attitudes before one another in the light of a (reasonable interpretation)¹⁵ of valid constitutional principles. Rawls refers here to “values of public reason,” elsewhere to the “premises we accept and think others could reasonably accept.”¹⁶ In a secular state, only those political decisions can count as legitimate that can be impartially justified in the light of generally accessible reasons, in other words, that can be justified equally toward religious and nonreligious citizens and citizens of different confessions. The exercise of power that cannot be justified in an impartial manner is illegitimate because it reflects the fact that one party is forcing its will on another. Citizens of a democratic polity are obliged to provide each other with reasons, because only in this way can political power shed its repressive character. This explains the controversial “proviso” to which the public use of nonpublic reasons is supposed to be subject.

The principle of separation of church and state obliges politicians and officials within political institutions to formulate and justify laws, court rulings, decrees, and measures exclusively in a language that is equally accessible to all citizens.¹⁷ By contrast, the proviso to which citizens, political parties and their candidates, social organizations, churches, and other religious associations are subject in the public arena is not quite so strict. Rawls writes: “The first is that reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or non-religious, may be introduced in public political discussion at

¹⁴ Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 217.

¹⁵ Rawls speaks of a “family of liberal conceptions of justice” to which the use of public reason can refer when interpreting constitutional principles; see Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” pp. 773f.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 786.

¹⁷ For a specification of the demand for reasons in a “generally accessible” language, see Forst, *Contexts of Justice*, trans. John M. M. Farrell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 126–33.

any time, *provided that in due course proper political reasons – and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines – are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are said to support.*¹⁸ This means that the political reasons appealed to in each case may not be put forward simply as a pretext, but must “count” irrespective of the religious context in which they are embedded.¹⁹

On the liberal conception, the state guarantees citizens freedom of religion only on the condition that religious communities, each from the viewpoint of their respective doctrinal traditions, accept not only the neutrality of public institutions, and hence the separation of church and state, but also the restrictive definition of the public use of reason. Rawls insists on these requirements even in the face of an objection that he himself raises: “How is it possible . . . for those of faith . . . to endorse a constitutional regime even when their comprehensive doctrines may not prosper under it, and indeed may decline?”²⁰

Rawls’s conception of the public use of reason has met with sharp criticism. Objections are leveled in the first instance, not against his liberal premises per se, but against an overly narrow, secularist definition of the political role of religion within the context of a liberal political order. However, the dissent ultimately also seems to affect the real substance of the liberal state. What interests me here is how the line of demarcation to claims that are illegitimate on a liberal constitution is drawn. However, arguments for a more generous interpretation of the political role of religion which are incompatible with the secular character of the state should not be confused with well-founded

¹⁸ Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” pp. 783f. (my italics). This represents a revision of the more narrowly formulated principle in Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 224f. Rawls confines the proviso to key issues affecting “constitutional essentials”; I consider this reservation unrealistic in the case of modern legal systems in which basic rights directly affect concrete legislation and adjudication, so that virtually any controversial legal issue can be heightened into an issue of principle.

¹⁹ Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” p. 777: “They are not puppets manipulated from behind the scenes by comprehensive doctrines.”

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 781. I shall return to this objection later.

objections to a secularist understanding of democracy and the rule of law.

The separation of church and state demands that the institutions of the state should operate with strict impartiality vis-à-vis religious communities; parliaments, courts, and the administration must not violate the requirement of neutrality by favoring one side at the expense of another. However, this principle should not be reduced to the laicist demand that the state should refrain from adopting any political stance that would support or (in accordance with the guarantee of freedom of religion) constrain religion per se, even if this affects all religious communities equally. That would amount to an overly narrow interpretation of the separation of church and state.²¹ At the same time, the rejection of secularism must not open the door for revisions that would undermine the principle itself. The toleration of religious justifications within the legislative process is a case in point, as we shall see. That said, Rawls's liberal position has drawn his critics' attention less to the impartiality of state institutions than to the normative implications of citizenship.

(3) Rawls's critics cite historical examples of the beneficial political influence that churches and religious movements have actually had on the realization or defense of democracy and human rights. Martin Luther King and the US Civil Rights Movement illustrate the successful struggle for a broader inclusion of minorities and marginal groups in the political process. In this context, the deep religious roots of the motivations of most social and socialist movements in both the Anglo-American and the European countries are highly impressive.²² There are obvious historical counter-examples of the authoritarian or repressive role of churches and fundamentalist movements; however, in well-established constitutional states, churches and religious communities generally perform important functions for stabilizing and advancing a liberal

²¹ See the debate between Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff in Audi and Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), pp. 3f., 76f., and 167f.

²² See Norman Birnbaum, *After Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

political culture. This is especially true of the form of civil religion so well developed in American society.²³

Paul Weithman draws on these sociological findings to support a normative analysis of the ethics of democratic citizenship. He describes churches and religious communities as actors in civil society who fulfill indispensable functional imperatives for the reproduction of American democracy. They provide arguments for public debates on crucial morally loaded issues and fulfill tasks of political socialization by informing their members and encouraging them to participate in the political process. The churches' civic engagement would, however, wane, so the argument goes, if they constantly had to distinguish between religious and political values according to the yardstick laid down by Rawls's "proviso" – in other words, if they were obliged to find an equivalent in a universally accessible language for every religious statement they pronounce. Therefore, if only for functional reasons, the liberal state must refrain from obliging churches and religious communities to comply with such standards of self-censorship. And all the more so must it eschew imposing a similar limitation on its citizens.²⁴

However, this is not the central objection to Rawls's theory. Irrespective of how the interests are balanced in the relationship

²³ See the influential study by Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton, *Habits of the Heart* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985). On Bellah's relevant publications in this field, see the festschrift by Richard Madson et al. (eds), *Meaning and Modernity: Religion, Polity and Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

²⁴ On this empirical argument, see Paul J. Weithman, *Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 91: "I argued that churches contribute to democracy in the United States by fostering realized democratic citizenship. They encourage their members to accept democratic values as the basis for important political decisions and to accept democratic institutions as legitimate. The means by which they make their contributions, including their own interventions in civic argument and public political debate, affect the political arguments their members may be inclined to use, the basis on which they vote, and the specification of their citizenship with which they identify. They may encourage their members to think of themselves as bound by antecedently given moral norms with which political outcomes must be consistent. The realization of citizenship by those who are legally entitled to take part in political decision-making is an enormous achievement for a liberal democracy, one in which the institutions of civil society play a crucial role."

between the state and religious organizations, a state cannot encumber its citizens, to whom it guarantees freedom of religion, with duties that are incompatible with pursuing a devout life – it cannot expect something impossible of them. This objection merits closer scrutiny.

Robert Audi expresses the duty of civility postulated by Rawls as a special “principle of secular justifications”: “One has a prima facie obligation not to advocate or support any law or public policy . . . unless one has, and is willing to offer, adequate secular reasons for this advocacy or support.”²⁵ Audi supplements this principle with a requirement that goes even further, namely, the demand that the secular reasons must be strong enough to direct the citizen’s own behavior, for example when voting in elections, quite independently of the concomitant religious motivations.²⁶ Now, the link between the actual motivation for a citizen’s actions and those reasons he cites in public may be relevant for a moral judgment of the citizen, but it has no import for assessing his contribution to maintaining a liberal political culture. For in the final analysis, only the manifest reasons have institutional implications for the formation of majorities and decision-making within the relevant political bodies.

As regards the political consequences, all and only those issues, statements, facts, and reasons “count” that find their way into the impersonal circuits of public communication and contribute to the cognitive motivation of *some* decision (backed and implemented by state power). This holds both for direct influence on the decisions of voters and for indirect influence on the decisions taken by party leaders, members of parliament, or officeholders (such as judges, ministers, or civil servants). Hence I will ignore Audi’s additional requirement for motivation as well as his distinction between publicly expressed reasons and those that motivate behavior in the polling booth.²⁷ What is essential for the standard version of political liberalism is simply the demand for “secular justifications”: since only secular reasons count in

²⁵ Audi and Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square*, p. 25.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁷ This distinction also prompts Paul Weithman to adapt his modified proviso accordingly; see Weithman, *Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship*, p. 3.

the liberal state, citizens who adhere to a religious faith are obliged to establish a kind of “balance” between their religious and their secular convictions – in Audi’s words, a theo-ethical equilibrium.²⁸

This demand is countered by the objection that many religious citizens would not be able to undertake such an artificial division within their own minds without jeopardizing the pious conduct of their lives. This objection must be distinguished from the empirical observation that many citizens who take a stance on political issues from a religious viewpoint do not have enough knowledge or imagination to find correspondingly secular justifications that are independent of their authentic beliefs. This fact is serious enough given that any “ought” implies a “can.” Yet the central objection has normative implications, as it relates to the integral role that religion plays – i.e. its “seat” – in the life of a person of faith. A devout person conducts her daily existence *on the basis of* her faith. Genuine faith is not merely a doctrine, something believed, but is also a source of energy that the person of faith taps into performatively to nurture her whole life.²⁹

However, this totalizing trait of a form of faith that permeates the very pores of daily life resists, so the objection goes, any nimble switchover of religiously rooted political convictions onto a *different* cognitive basis:

It belongs to the religious convictions of a good many religious people in our society that *they ought to base* their decisions concerning fundamental issues of justice *on* their religious convictions.

²⁸ Audi has since introduced a counterpart to the principle of secular justification: “In liberal democracies, religious citizens have a prima facie obligation not to advocate or support any law or public policy that restricts human conduct, unless they have, and are willing to offer, adequate religiously acceptable reasons for this advocacy or support” (Audi, “Moral Foundations of Liberal Democracy, Secular Reasons, and Liberal Neutrality toward the Good,” *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics and Public Policy* 19 (2005): 197–218, here p. 217). This principle of religious justification is evidently meant to impose an obligation of critical self-scrutiny on citizens who are initially guided by religious reasons.

²⁹ On the Augustinian distinction of *fides quae creditur* [i.e. faith in the sense of what is believed] and *fides qua creditur* [i.e. faith in the sense of the act of believing], see Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologische Enzyklopädie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1984), pp. 185ff.

They do not view it as an option whether or not to do it. It is their conviction that they ought to strive for wholeness, integrity, integration in their lives: that they ought to allow the Word of God, the teachings of the Torah, the command and example of Jesus, or whatever, to shape their existence as a whole, including, then, their social and political existence. Their religion is not, for them, about *something other* than their social and political existence.³⁰

Their religiously grounded conception of justice tells them what is politically right and wrong, so that they are unable to discern “any ‘pull’ from any secular reasons.”³¹

If we accept this, to my mind compelling, objection, then the liberal state, which expressly protects such forms of existence as a basic right, cannot at the same time expect *all* citizens in addition to justify their political positions independently of their religious convictions or worldviews. This strict demand can only be made of politicians operating within state institutions who have a duty to remain neutral among competing worldviews, in other words, of all those who hold a public office or are candidates for such.³²

The neutrality of the state toward competing worldviews is the institutional precondition for the equal guarantee of freedom of religion for all. The consensus on constitutional principles in which all citizens must share pertains also to the principle of the separation of church and state. However, in light of the aforementioned key objection, to extend this principle from the

³⁰ Wolterstorff, in Audi and Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square*, p. 105.

³¹ Weithman, *Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship*, p. 157.

³² This raises the interesting question of the extent to which during an election campaign candidates may confess or even indicate that they are religious persons. The principle of separation of church and state certainly extends to the platform, the manifesto, or the “line” that political parties and their candidates promise to realize. Electoral decisions that are driven by personality issues instead of programmatic ones are in any case problematic from a normative perspective. And it becomes even more problematic when the voters take their cue from candidates’ religious self-presentations. See on this point the ideas elaborated by Weithman (*ibid.*, pp. 117–20): “It would be good to have principles saying what role religion can play when candidates are assessed for what we might call their ‘expressive value’ – their fittingness to express the values of their constituencies . . . What is most important to remember about these cases, however, is that elections should not be decided nor votes cast entirely or primarily on the basis of various candidates’ expressive value.”

institutional level to statements put forward by organizations and citizens in the political public sphere would constitute an over-generalization of secularism. We cannot infer from the secular character of the state a direct personal obligation on all citizens to supplement their publicly expressed religious convictions by equivalents in a generally accessible language. And certainly the normative expectation that all religious citizens when casting their vote should *ultimately* let themselves be guided by secular considerations is to ignore the realities of a devout life, an existence *guided* by faith. This assertion has, however, been disputed by pointing to the actual situation of religious citizens in the secular milieu of a modern society.³³

After all, the conflict between one's own religious convictions and secularly justified policies or proposed laws can only arise because even the religious citizen is already supposed to have accepted the constitution of the secular state for good reasons. He no longer lives as a member of a religiously homogeneous population within a religiously legitimated state. Hence certainties of faith are interconnected with fallible convictions of a secular nature; they have long since lost their purported immunity to the impositions of modern reflexivity – in the manner of “unmoved” but not “unmovable movers.”³⁴ Religious certainties are in fact exposed to increasing reflective pressure in the differentiated architecture of modern societies. Religiously rooted existential convictions, by dint of their if necessary rationally justified reference to the dogmatic authority of an inviolable core of infallible revealed truths, evade that kind of *unreserved* discursive examination to which other ethical orientations and worldviews, i.e. secular “conceptions of the good,” are exposed.³⁵

³³ Thomas M. Schmidt, “Glaubensüberzeugungen und säkulare Gründe,” *Zeitschrift für evangelische Ethik* 4 (2001): 248–61.

³⁴ Schmidt bases his objection on Gerald F. Gaus, *Justificatory Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

³⁵ As it happens, this special status prohibits a normative-political assimilation of religious convictions to ethical convictions, as practiced by Forst (*Contexts of Justice*, pp. 93–100) when he accords the principled priority of procedural over substantive criteria of justification precedence over the distinction between religious and secular reasons. Only conflicting religious beliefs teach us *a fortiori* that a justified consensus cannot be reached. In his more recent book, Forst (*Toleranz im Konflikt*, pp. 644ff.) acknowledges the special status of this category of beliefs.

This discursive extraterritoriality of a core of existential certainties *can* lend religious convictions (on certain readings) an integral character. At any rate, the liberal state, which protects all religious forms of life equally, must release religious citizens from the burden of having to make a strict separation between secular and religious reasons in the political public arena when they experience this as an attack on their personal identity.

(4) The liberal state must not transform the necessary *institutional* separation between religion and politics into an unreasonable *mental and psychological* burden for its religious citizens. It must, however, expect them to recognize the principle that the exercise of political authority must be neutral toward competing world-views. Every citizen must know and accept that only secular reasons count beyond the institutional threshold separating the informal public sphere from parliaments, courts, ministries, and administrations. This only calls for the epistemic ability to consider one's own religious convictions reflexively from the outside and to connect them with secular views. Religious citizens can certainly acknowledge this "institutional translation proviso" without having to split their identity into public and private parts the moment they participate in public discourses. They should therefore also be allowed to express and justify their convictions in a religious language even when they cannot find secular "translations" for them.

This need not at all estrange "monolingual" citizens from the political process, because they also take political positions even when they adduce religious reasons.³⁶ Even if the religious language is the only one they speak in public, and if religiously justified opinions are the only ones they can or wish to contribute to political controversies, they nevertheless understand themselves as members of a *civitas terrena*, which empowers them to be the authors of laws to which they are subject as addressees. They may express themselves in a religious idiom only on the condition that they recognize the institutional translation proviso. Thus the citizens, confident that their fellow-citizens will cooperate in producing a translation, can understand themselves as partici-

³⁶ Here I am responding to a written objection of Rainer Forst.

pants in the legislative process, although only secular reasons count therein.

The admissibility of nontranslated religious utterances in the political arena can be justified not only on the normative grounds that it is not reasonable to *expect* Rawls's proviso to apply to those among the faithful who cannot abstain from the political use of "private" reasons without compromising their religious way of life. There are also functional reasons for not overhastily reducing the polyphonic complexity of public voices. For the liberal state has an interest in the free expression of religious voices in the public arena and in the political participation of religious organizations. It must not discourage religious persons and communities from also expressing themselves *as such* in the political arena, for it cannot be sure that secular society would not otherwise cut itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity. Secular citizens or those of other religious persuasions can also learn something from religious contributions under certain circumstances, for example, when they recognize buried intuitions of their own in the normative truth contents of a religious utterance.

Religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life. In corresponding political debates, this potential makes religious speech into a serious vehicle for possible truth contents, which can then be translated from the vocabulary of a particular religious community into a generally accessible language. However, the institutional thresholds between the "wild" political public sphere and the formal proceedings within political bodies also function as a filter that allows only secular contributions from the Babel of voices in the informal flows of public communication to pass through. In parliament, for example, the rules of procedure must empower the house leader to strike religious positions or justifications from the official transcript. The truth contents of religious contributions can enter into the institutionalized practice of deliberation and decision-making only when the necessary translation already occurs in the pre-parliamentarian domain, i.e. in the political public sphere itself.

To be sure, this requirement of translation must be conceived as a cooperative task in which the nonreligious citizens must likewise participate if their religious fellow-citizens, who are ready

and willing to participate, are not to be burdened in an asymmetrical way.³⁷ Whereas citizens of faith may make public contributions in their own religious language only subject to the translation proviso, by way of compensation secular citizens must open their minds to the possible truth content of those presentations and enter into dialogues from which religious reasons might well emerge in the transformed guise of generally accessible arguments.³⁸ Citizens of a democratic polity owe one another good reasons for their political positions. Even if the religious contributions are not subjected to self-censorship, they depend on cooperative acts of translation. For without a successful translation the substantive content of religious voices has no prospect of being taken up into the agendas and negotiations within political bodies and of gaining a hearing in the broader political process. By contrast, Nicholas Wolterstorff and Paul Weithman wish to jettison even this proviso. However, they thereby infringe against the principle that the state should remain neutral toward competing worldviews, contrary to their claim to remain in line with liberal premises.

In Weithman's opinion, citizens have the moral right to justify public political statements in the context of a comprehensive worldview or a religious doctrine. In this case, however, they are supposed to meet two conditions: first, they must be convinced

³⁷ In this sense, Forst (*Contexts of Justice*, p. 98) likewise speaks of "translation" when he requires that "a person (must) be able to make a (progressive) *translation* [his emphasis] of their arguments into reasons that are acceptable on the basis of the values and principles of public reason." However, he does not regard the process of translation as a cooperative search for the truth in which secular citizens should engage even if the other side limits itself to religious utterances. Forst, like Rawls and Audi, formulates the requirement as a civic duty incumbent upon the religious person him- or herself. Besides, the purely procedural definition of the act of translation aimed at "unrestricted reciprocal justification" does not do justice to the semantic problem of transposing the contents of religious speech into a postreligious and postmetaphysical mode of representation. As a result, the difference between ethical and religious discourse is lost from view. See, for example, Edmund Arens, *Kommunikative Handlungen* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1982), who interprets biblical parables as innovative speech acts.

³⁸ Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," in Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, trans. Hella Beister and William Rehg (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), pp. 101–15.

that their government is justified in carrying out the laws or policies they support with religious arguments; and, second, they must be willing to explain why they believe this. This toned-down version of the proviso³⁹ amounts to the demand to undertake a universalization test from the first-person perspective. In this way, Weithman wants to ensure that citizens make their judgment from the standpoint of a conception of justice, even one grounded in terms of a religion or another substantive worldview. Citizens are supposed to consider in each case from the perspective of their own doctrine what would be equally good for everyone. However, the Golden Rule is not the Categorical Imperative. It does not oblige all those affected to *mutually* adopt each other's perspectives.⁴⁰ On this egocentric procedure, each person's worldview constitutes the insurmountable horizon of her deliberations on justice: "The person who argues in public for a measure must be prepared to say what she thinks would justify the government in enacting it, *but the justification she is prepared to offer may depend on claims, including religious claims, which proponents of the standard approach would deem inaccessible.*"⁴¹

Since no institutional filters are envisaged between the state and the public arena, this version does not exclude the possibility that policies and legal programs will be implemented solely on the basis of the specific religious or confessional beliefs of a ruling majority. This is the conclusion explicitly drawn by Nicholas Wolterstorff, who does not favor any constraint whatsoever on the political use of religious reasons – even the political legislator should be permitted to make use of religious arguments.⁴²

³⁹ Weithman, *Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship*, p. 3: "Citizens of a liberal democracy may offer arguments in public political debate which depend on reasons drawn from their comprehensive moral views, including their religious views, without making them good by appeal to other arguments – provided they believe that their government would be justified in adopting the measures they favor and are prepared to indicate what they think would justify the adoption of the measures."

⁴⁰ Habermas, "On the Pragmatic, the Ethical, and the Moral Employments of Practical Reason," in *Justification and Application*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 12–14.

⁴¹ Weithman, *Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship*, p. 121 (my emphasis).

⁴² Audi and Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square*, pp. 117f.

However, by opening parliaments to conflicts over religious certainties, governmental authority can become the agent of a religious majority that imposes its will in violation of the democratic procedure.

Of course, it is not the majority vote itself, assuming that it has been correctly carried out, that is illegitimate, but the violation of the other essential components of the procedure, namely, the discursive character of the preceding deliberations. What is illegitimate is the violation of the principle of the neutrality of the exercise of political power which holds that all coercively enforceable political decisions must be *formulated* and be *justifiable* in a language that is equally intelligible to all citizens. Majority rule mutates into repression if the majority deploys religious arguments in the process of political opinion- and will-formation and refuses to offer publicly accessible justifications that the outvoted minority, be it secular or of a different faith, can follow and evaluate in the light of shared standards. The democratic procedure owes its power to generate legitimacy to its deliberative character in addition to the fact that it includes all participants; for the justified presumption of rational outcomes rests on this in the long run.

Wolterstorff pre-empts this objection by rejecting the whole idea of legitimation based on a reasonable background consensus on constitutional essentials. In the liberal view, political power sheds its inherently violent character by virtue of its binding legal connection to the exercise of power in accordance with principles capable of meeting with universal agreement.⁴³ Wolterstorff raises empirical objections to this conception. He ridicules the idealizing assumptions inscribed in the practices of the constitutional state as the “Quaker meeting ideal” (though the Quaker principle of unanimity is not typical of the democratic process). He maintains that the conflict between conceptions of justice grounded in competing religions or worldviews can never be resolved by the common assumption of a background consensus, however formal.

⁴³ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 137: “Our exercise of political power is fully proper only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens as free and equal may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to their common human reason.”

Although he wants to retain the majority principle from the liberal constitutional consensus, Wolterstorff can conceive of coexistence in an ideologically divided society based on majority decisions only as a reluctant adaptation to a kind of *modus vivendi*: "I do not agree, I *acquiesce* – unless I find the decision truly appalling."⁴⁴

It remains unclear on this premise why the political community should not be in constant danger of disintegrating into religious conflicts. To be sure, the standard empiricist reading of liberal democracy has always construed majority decisions as the temporary subjection of a minority to the *de facto* power of the numerically superior party.⁴⁵ But according to this theory the acceptance of the voting procedure is explained by the willingness to compromise of parties who at any rate agree in their preference for the largest possible share of basic goods, such as money, security, or leisure time. The parties can reach compromises because they all aspire to the *same* categories of divisible goods. Yet precisely this condition is no longer met as soon as the conflicts are no longer triggered by agreed-upon basic goods, but by competing "goods of salvation." Conflicts over existential values between communities of faith cannot be resolved by compromise. They can only be alleviated by being depoliticized against the background of a jointly assumed consensus on constitutional principles.

(5) The competition between worldviews and religious doctrines that claim to explain human beings' position in the world as a whole cannot be resolved at the cognitive level. As soon as these cognitive dissonances penetrate the foundations of the normative regulation of the social interactions of citizens, the political community fragments into irreconcilable religious and ideological segments based on a precarious *modus vivendi*. In the absence of the uniting bond of a legally unenforceable civic solidarity, citizens do not regard themselves as free and equal participants in the shared practices of democratic opinion- and will-formation in

⁴⁴ Audi and Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square*, p. 160.

⁴⁵ In the tradition of Hayek and Popper, see, for example, Werner Becker, *Die Freiheit, die wir meinen* (Munich: Piper, 1986).

which they *owe* one another *reasons* for their political stances. This reciprocity of expectations among citizens is what sets a liberal polity integrated by a constitution apart from a community segmented along the divisions between competing worldviews. Such a community frees religious and secular citizens in their dealings with one another from the reciprocal obligation to justify themselves in political controversies *toward one another*. Since here the dissonant background beliefs and subcultural bonds out-trump the supposed constitutional consensus and the expected civic solidarity, citizens need not adapt to or become involved with *one another* as second persons in deep conflicts.

Foregoing reciprocity and mutual indifference seems to be justified by the fact that the liberal state contradicts itself if it demands that all citizens conform to a political ethos that imposes unequal cognitive burdens on them. The translation proviso for religious reasons and the institutional precedence of secular over religious reasons demand that religious citizens make an effort to learn and adapt that secular citizens are spared. This would, at any rate, concur with the empirical observation that a certain resentment has long persisted also within the churches toward the secular state. The duty to make public use of one's reason can be fulfilled only under certain cognitive preconditions. However, such epistemic attitudes are an expression of an already existing mentality and cannot be made the content of normative expectations and political appeals to virtue, as motives can. Every "ought" presupposes a "can." The normative expectations associated with democratic citizenship remain ineffectual unless a corresponding change in mentality has taken place; otherwise they only serve to kindle resentment on the part of those who feel harried and misunderstood.

By contrast, Western culture has witnessed a transformation of religious consciousness since the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Sociologists describe this "modernization" of religious consciousness as a response of religious traditions to the challenges posed by the fact of religious pluralism, the emergence of modern science, and the spread of positive law and secular morality. In these three respects, traditional communities of faith must process cognitive dissonances that either do not arise for secular citizens, or arise only insofar as they adhere to doctrines anchored in similarly dogmatic ways:

- Religious citizens must develop an epistemic stance toward other religions and worldviews that they encounter within a universe of discourse hitherto occupied only by their own religion. They succeed in this to the extent that they relate their religious beliefs in a self-reflexive manner to the claims of competing doctrines of salvation so that they do not jeopardize their own exclusive claim to truth.
- Furthermore, religious citizens must develop an epistemic stance toward the internal logic of secular knowledge and toward the institutionalized monopoly on knowledge of modern scientific experts. They can succeed in this only to the extent that they conceive the relationship between dogmatic beliefs and secular knowledge from their religious viewpoint in such a way that the autonomous progress of secular knowledge cannot conflict with articles of faith.
- Finally, religious citizens must develop an epistemic stance toward the priority that secular reasons also enjoy in the political arena. This can succeed only to the extent that they embed the egalitarian individualism of modern natural law and universalistic morality in a convincing way in the context of their comprehensive doctrines.

This arduous work of hermeneutic self-reflection must be undertaken from within the perspective of religious traditions. In our culture, it has been accomplished in essence by theology and, on the Catholic side, also by an apologetic philosophy of religion that seeks to explicate the reasonableness of faith.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ I am indebted to correspondence with Thomas M. Schmidt for the characterization of a non-agnostic philosophy of religion devoted to the self-enlightenment of religion that, unlike theology, does not speak “in the name of” a particular revealed religion, yet does not merely speak as “its observer” either. See also Matthias Lutz-Bachmann, “Religion-Philosophie-Religionsphilosophie,” in Matthias Jung et al. (eds), *Religionsphilosophie* (Würzburg: Echter, 2000), pp. 19–26. Friedrich Schleiermacher played an exemplary role on the Protestant side. He made a careful distinction between the role of the theologian and that of the apologetic philosopher of religion (who draws on Kant’s transcendental idealism rather than on the Thomist tradition) and united both in his own person. See the introduction to his explication of the Christian doctrine in Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. H. P. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999), §§1–10.

Yet in the final instance it is the faith and practice of the religious community that decide whether a dogmatic processing of the cognitive challenges of modernity has been “successful” or not; only then can believers accept it as a “learning process.” The new epistemic attitudes can be described as “acquired by learning” only if they result from a reconstruction of articles of faith that is convincing for people of faith, in the light of modern conditions of life to which there are no longer any alternatives. If those attitudes were merely the contingent result of conditioning or forced adaptation, then the question of how those cognitive preconditions for the reasonableness of a liberal civic ethos are met would have to be answered à la Foucault – namely, as a result of the kind of “discursive power” that imposes itself in the apparent transparency of enlightened knowledge. Of course, this answer would contradict the normative self-understanding of the constitutional state.

Within this liberal framework, what interests me is the open question of whether the revised concept of citizenship that I have proposed still imposes an *asymmetrical* burden on religious traditions and religious communities. Historically speaking, religious citizens had to learn to adopt epistemic attitudes toward their secular environment that come easily to enlightened secular citizens, since the latter are spared similar cognitive dissonances from the outset. However, the latter are not spared a cognitive burden either, for something more than a secularist attitude is called for by cooperation with religious fellow-citizens. This cognitive adaptation should not be confused with the political virtue of mere tolerance. What is at stake is not a respectful sensibility for the possible existential significance of religion for some other person, something also expected of secular citizens, but a self-reflexive overcoming of a rigid and exclusive secularist self-understanding of modernity.

As long as secular citizens are convinced that religious traditions and religious communities are, as it were, archaic relics of premodern societies persisting into the present, they can understand freedom of religion only as the cultural equivalent of the conservation of species threatened with extinction. Religion no longer has any intrinsic justification in their eyes. Even the

principle of the separation of church and state can have for them only the laicist meaning of benign indifference. In the secularist reading, it can be anticipated that religious views will ultimately dissolve in the acid of scientific criticism and that religious communities will not be able to withstand the pressures of advancing cultural and social modernization. Clearly, citizens who adopt such an epistemic stance toward religion can no longer be expected to take religious contributions to contentious political issues seriously or to participate in a cooperative search for truth to determine whether they may contain elements that can be expressed in a secular language and be justified by rational arguments.

On the normative premises of the constitutional state and of a democratic civic ethos, the admission of religious assertions into the political arena only makes sense if *all* citizens can be reasonably expected not to exclude the possibility that these contributions may have cognitive substance – while at the same time respecting the priority of secular reasons and the institutional translation proviso. This is what the religious citizens assume in any case. Yet such an attitude presupposes a mentality on the part of secular citizens that is far from a matter of course in the secularized societies of the West. On the contrary, the recognition by secular citizens that they live in a postsecular society that is also *epistemically attuned* to the continued existence of religious communities is a consequence of a change in mentality that is no less cognitively exacting than the adaptation of religious consciousness to the challenges of an environment that is becoming progressively more secular. In line with the standards of an enlightenment endowed with a critical awareness of its own limits, the secular citizens understand their non-agreement with religious conceptions as a *disagreement* that it is *reasonable* to expect.

Without this cognitive presupposition, citizens cannot be reasonably expected to make a public use of their reason, at least not in the sense that secular citizens are willing to enter into a political discussion of the content of religious contributions with the intention of translating potentially morally convincing intuitions and reasons into a generally accessible language. This presupposes an epistemic mindset that is the result of a self-critical assessment of

the limits of secular reason.⁴⁷ However, this cognitive precondition implies that it is reasonable to expect the version of an ethics of citizenship I have proposed of all citizens equally only if both religious and secular citizens have already undergone *complementary* learning processes.

(6) The critical overcoming of the to my mind narrow secularist mindset is itself, of course, essentially contested – at least as much as the theological responses to the cognitive challenges of modernity that have become influential since the Reformation (not merely among Protestants). Whereas we regard the “modernization of religious consciousness” as a matter for theology and can already describe it with historical hindsight, the naturalistic background of secularism is the focus of a continuing, open-ended philosophical debate. The secular awareness that we live in a postsecular society finds philosophical expression in postmetaphysical thinking. This mode of thought is not exhausted by emphasizing the finiteness of reason or by the combination of fallibilism with anti-skeptical conceptions of truth that has marked the self-understanding of modern empirical science since Kant and Peirce. The secular counterpart to reflexive religious consciousness is an agnostic, but nonreductionist form of postmetaphysical thinking. It refrains, on the one hand, from passing judgment on religious truths, while insisting (in a nonpolemical fashion) on making a strict demarcation between faith and knowledge. On the other hand, it rejects a scientistically truncated conception of reason and the exclusion of religious doctrines from the genealogy of reason.

Postmetaphysical thinking refrains from making ontological pronouncements on the constitution of being as such; however, this does not imply a reduction of our knowledge to the sum total of statements that represent the current “state of science.” Scientism often misleads us into blurring the boundary between natural scientific knowledge which is relevant for understanding

⁴⁷ In his masterful study of the history of the notion of tolerance, Rainer Forst credits Pierre Bayle with being the “greatest thinker on tolerance” because Bayle provides such an exemplary reflexive self-limitation of reason in relation to religion. On Bayle, see Forst, *Toleranz im Konflikt*, §18, and, for the systematic argument, §§29 and 33.

ourselves and our place in nature as a whole, on the one hand, and a synthetic naturalistic worldview constructed on this basis, on the other.⁴⁸ This form of radical naturalism devalues all types of statements that cannot be traced back to empirical observations, statements of laws, or causal explanations, hence moral, legal, and evaluative statements no less than religious ones. As the revived discussion of freedom and determinism shows, advances in biogenetics, brain research, and robotics provide stimuli for a kind of naturalization of the human mind that places our practical self-understanding as responsibly acting persons in question⁴⁹ and preempts calls for a revision of criminal law.⁵⁰ However, the permeation of everyday life by a naturalistic self-objectification of speaking and acting subjects is incompatible with any conception of political integration that imputes a *normative* background consensus to citizens.

One route by which a multidimensional reason that is not exclusively fixated on its reference to the objective world can achieve a self-critical awareness of its boundaries is through a reconstruction of its own genesis that enables it to catch up with itself, as it were, and to overcome fixations. In the process, post-metaphysical thinking does not restrict itself to the heritage of Western metaphysics but also reconfirms its internal relationship to those world religions whose origins, like those of ancient philosophy, date back to the middle of the first millennium before Christ, i.e. to what Jaspers called the "Axial Age."⁵¹ For the

⁴⁸ Wolterstorff alerts us in a general way to this in practice all-too-frequently blurred distinction between secular statements and reasons that should count, and secular worldviews that should count just as little as religious doctrines. See Audi and Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square*, p. 105: "Much if not most of the time we will be able to spot religious reasons from a mile away . . . Typically, however, comprehensive secular perspectives will go undetected."

⁴⁹ Christian Geyer (ed.), *Hirnforschung und Willensfreiheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004); Michael Pauen, *Illusion Freiheit?* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2004).

⁵⁰ Hubert Rottleuthner, "Zur Soziologie und Neurobiologie richterlichen Handelns," in Reinhard Damm et al. (eds), *Festschrift für Thomas Raiser* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), pp. 579–98.

⁵¹ See the research program pursued since the 1970s by Samuel N. Eisenstadt, most recently in Johan P. Arnason et al. (eds), *Axial Civilizations and World History* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005).

religions that have their roots in this period made the cognitive leap from mythical narratives to a logos that differentiates between essence and appearance in a very similar way to Greek philosophy. Since the Council of Nicaea, philosophy also took on board and assimilated many motifs and concepts, especially those associated with salvation, from monotheistic traditions in the course of a Hellenization of Christianity.⁵²

The complex web of inheritance cannot be disentangled solely along the lines of a history of being, as Heidegger claimed.⁵³ Greek concepts such as “autonomy” and “individuality,” or Roman concepts such as “emancipation” and “solidarity,” have long since been invested with meanings of Judeo-Christian origin.⁵⁴ Philosophy has repeatedly learned through its encounters with religious traditions – and also, of course, with Muslim traditions – that it receives innovative impulses when it succeeds in freeing cognitive contents from their dogmatic encapsulation in the crucible of rational discourse. Kant and Hegel are the most influential examples of this. The encounters of many twentieth-century philosophers with a religious writer such as Kierkegaard, who thinks in postmetaphysical, but not post-Christian, terms, are also exemplary in this regard.

Religious traditions appear to have remained present in an even more vital sense than metaphysics, even if they at times present themselves as the opaque other of reason. It would be unreasonable to reject out of hand the idea that the major world religions – as the only surviving element of the now alien cultures of the Ancient Empires – can claim a place within the differentiated architecture of modernity because their cognitive substance has not yet been exhausted. At any rate, we cannot exclude that they involve semantic potentials capable of exercising an inspirational force on society *as a whole* as soon as they divulge their profane truth contents.

⁵² M. Lutz-Bachmann, “Hellenisierung des Christentum?” in Carsten Colpe et al., *Spätantike und Christentum* (Berlin: Akademie, 1992), pp. 77–98.

⁵³ See the sketches of a history of Being in Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy: From Enowning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

⁵⁴ See the interesting discussions in Hauke Brunkhorst, *Solidarität* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002), pp. 40–78.

In short, postmetaphysical thinking is prepared to learn from religion while at the same time remaining agnostic. It insists on the difference between the certainties of faith and publicly criticizable validity claims; but it eschews the rationalist presumption that it can itself decide which aspects of religious doctrines are rational and which irrational. The contents that reason appropriates through translation must not be lost for faith. However, providing an apology for faith employing philosophical means is not a task for philosophy proper. At best, philosophy *circumscribes* the opaque core of religious experience when it reflects on the specific character of religious language and on the intrinsic meaning of faith. This core remains as profoundly alien to discursive thought as the hermetic core of aesthetic experience, which likewise can be at best circumscribed, but not penetrated, by philosophical reflection.

I have discussed this ambivalent attitude of postmetaphysical thinking to religion because it also expresses the cognitive presupposition for the willingness to cooperate of secular citizens. This ambivalent attitude to religion corresponds exactly to the epistemic attitude that secular citizens must adopt if they are to be prepared to learn something from the contributions of their religious counterparts to public debates which are potentially translatable into a generally accessible language. The philosophical recapitulation of the genealogy of reason clearly plays a similar role for a self-reflection of secularism as the reconstructive work of theology plays for the self-reflection of religious faith in the modern world. The effort of philosophical reconstruction required shows that the role of democratic citizenship assumes a mentality on the part of secular citizens that is no less demanding than the corresponding mentality of their religious counterparts. This is why the cognitive burdens imposed on both sides by the acquisition of the appropriate epistemic attitudes are not at all asymmetrical.

(7) The fact that the “public use of reason” (in the proposed interpretation) depends on cognitive preconditions that are far from trivial has interesting but ambivalent implications. It reminds us, first, that constitutional democracy, which relies on a deliberative form of politics, is an epistemically demanding,

“truth sensitive” form of government.⁵⁵ A “post-truth democracy,” which the *New York Times* declared to be in the ascendant during the last US presidential election, would no longer be a democracy. Moreover, the requirement of complex mentalities highlights an improbable functional imperative whose fulfillment the liberal state can scarcely influence through the legal and administrative means at its disposal. The polarization of a community into fundamentalist and secular camps demonstrates, for example, that political integration is jeopardized if too many citizens fail to live up to the standards of the public use of reason. However, mentalities are prepolitical in origin. They change incrementally and in unpredictable ways in response to social changes. A long-term process of this kind can at best be accelerated in the medium of public discourses conducted by the citizens themselves. Yet is this a cognitively steered process at all, one that may be described as a learning process?

A third implication is the most disquieting of all. We have assumed thus far that the citizens of a constitutional state can acquire the functionally requisite mentalities via “complementary learning processes.” The examples cited show that this assumption is not unproblematic. From what perspective may we claim that the fragmentation caused by a collision of fundamentalist and secularist convictions is the result of “learning deficits”? Let us recall the change in perspective that we made when we moved from a normative explanation of a democratic civic ethos to an epistemological investigation of the cognitive preconditions under which such an ethos can be reasonably expected of citizens. A change in epistemic attitudes must occur if religious consciousness is to become reflexive and if the secularist mindset is to overcome its limitations. But these changes in mentality count as complementary “learning processes” only from the perspective of a specific normative self-understanding of modernity.

This view can certainly be defended within the framework of an evolutionary social theory. But even setting aside the controversial status of such theories within their own academic disciplines, from the viewpoint of normative political theory citizens

⁵⁵ See Julian Nida-Rümelin’s Munich inaugural lecture, “Demokratie und Wahrheit” (MS, 2004).

can by no means be enjoined to describe themselves, for example, in terms of a theory of religious evolution and possibly to rate themselves as cognitively “backward.” Only those concerned and their religious organizations can decide whether a “modernized” faith is still the “true” faith. And whether or not, on the other side, a scientific form of secularism will ultimately win out over the more comprehensive concept of reason underlying postmetaphysical thinking is, for the time being, an open question even among philosophers themselves. However, if political theory must leave open the question of whether the functionally requisite mentalities can be acquired through learning processes at all, then it must also accept that its normatively justified concept of “the public use of reason” remains “essentially contested” among citizens themselves. For the liberal state may only impose duties on its citizens that the latter can perceive as *reasonable* expectations, which presupposes in turn that they can acquire the necessary epistemic attitudes through insight, i.e. through “learning.”

We must not be misled into drawing the wrong conclusions from this self-limitation of political theory. As philosophers and as citizens, we may well be convinced that a strong reading of the liberal and republican foundations of the constitutional state should *and can* be successfully defended both *intra muros* and in the political arena. However, this discourse concerning the correct understanding, and the correctness *tout court*, of a liberal constitution and a democratic civic ethos extends into a terrain where normative arguments do not go far enough. The controversy also extends to the epistemological question of the relationship between faith and knowledge, which itself impinges upon key elements of the background understanding of modernity. Interestingly enough, both the philosophical and the theological efforts to define the relationship between faith and knowledge in a self-reflexive manner throw up far-reaching questions concerning the genealogy of modernity.

Let us return to Rawls’s question: “How is it possible for those of faith, as well as the nonreligious, to endorse a secular regime even when their comprehensive doctrines may not prosper under it, and indeed may decline?”⁵⁶ This question cannot ultimately be

⁵⁶ See note 20.

answered in terms of the normative explanations of political theory. Let us take the example of “radical orthodoxy,” which takes up the intentions and basic ideas of the political theology of a Carl Schmitt and develops them further with the tools of deconstruction.⁵⁷ Theologians of this ilk dispute the validity of the modern age⁵⁸ with the aim of ontologically re-embedding a nominalistically uprooted modern world in the “reality of God.” Controversies with such opponents must be conducted within the proper disciplinary terrain. This means that theological claims can only be met with theological counterarguments, historical and epistemological claims with historical and epistemological counterarguments.⁵⁹

The same holds true for the opposite side. Rawls’s question is addressed equally to the religious and the secular side. A debate on basic philosophical issues becomes especially urgent when a naturalistic worldview oversteps the boundaries of its scientific competence. The public demand that religious communities should at long last renounce traditional statements concerning the existence of God and a life after death cannot be deduced from recent neurological insights into the dependence of all mental operations on brain processes – at least not until we have achieved philosophical clarity concerning the pragmatic meaning of such biblical statements and their historical context of transmission.⁶⁰ The problem of how scientific claims relate to religious convictions impinges, in turn, upon the genealogy of modernity’s understanding of itself. Is the practice of modern science fully understandable in its own terms? Does it provide the performative yardstick of all truth and falsehood? Or should it rather be

⁵⁷ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Milbank et al. (eds), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁵⁸ For the contrary position, see the early work of Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983).

⁵⁹ Schmidt, “Postsäkulare Theologie des Rechts: Eine Kritik der radikalen Orthodxie,” in Martin Frühauf and Werner Löser (eds), *Biblische Aufklärung: Die Entdeckung der Tradition* (Frankfurt am Main: Alber, 2005), pp. 91–108.

⁶⁰ See the final comment by W. Detel in his wonderfully informed article “Forschungen über Hirn und Geist,” *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 52 (2004): 891–920.

understood as the outcome of a history of reason of which the world religions are an integral part?

Rawls developed his "Theory of Justice" into a "Political Liberalism" because of his growing recognition of the relevance of the "fact of pluralism." He deserves the immense credit of having addressed the political role of religion at an early date. Yet these very phenomena can trigger an awareness of the limits of normative arguments in a supposedly "free-standing" political theory. For whether the liberal response to religious pluralism can be accepted by the citizens themselves as the single right answer depends not least on whether secular and religious citizens, from their respective points of view, are prepared to accept an interpretation of the relationship between faith and knowledge that first makes it possible for them to treat one another in a self-reflexive manner in the political arena.