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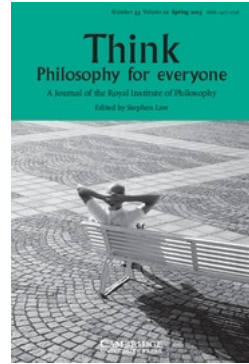
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## RELIGION IN POLITICS: WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Robert B. Talisse

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A few years ago, I, an American, was giving a talk at a political philosophy conference in the United Kingdom. My topic was religion in democratic politics, and I delivered what I thought was a splendid line of argument supporting the idea that religion has at most a highly constrained role to play in democratic politics. The audience was appreciative enough, but during the question and answer session, there emerged the charge that my paper had addressed a uniquely 'American' problem, a problem that was not of general significance to political philosophers outside of the United States. I replied that although the political scene in the contemporary United States provides many high-profile *examples* of the problem I had been addressing, the general problem of religion in politics confronts democracy as such. I then provided some cases from outside America in which the problem shows itself: the public slaying of Theo Van Gough, the controversy surrounding the publication of cartoon representations of Muhammad in Denmark, the reemergence of religiously-affiliated and reactionary political parties throughout Europe, and so on. Yet for the most part my audience remained unmoved.

This of course started me thinking that perhaps it is *true* that the problem of religion in politics is characteristically, perhaps uniquely, American. After all, it seems plausible to think that much of the trouble is generated by the line in the First Amendment of the US Constitution about the establishment of religion. Yet, even after this reflection, it still strikes me as a problem intrinsic to democracy itself rather than a problem confronting some specific democratic society or other. It might be that, given certain contingent

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features of the political scene in the United States, the problem is in some sense more present or pressing to philosophers in America. But that of course is consistent with the thought that the problem is endemic to democracy as such.

So my aim in this brief paper is to present the problem that religious belief poses for democratic politics in a way that is wholly general and not dependent upon the interpretation of some particular constitution or other founding legal document. Of course, given the level of generality that I aim to achieve, many of the finer distinctions one finds in the academic literature will go by the board. I aspire here to simply make the case that *there is* a problem that religious conviction poses for democratic politics. If I am successful in this, I will have also made progress in eliciting further assistance in trying to solve it.

Philosophers are notorious for insisting that all discussion must begin with definitions. The hazard of this method is that it encourages philosophers to haggle endlessly over the definitions and never get to the matters at hand. I do not intend to dwell on the definition of democracy; however, it will help for me to say *something* about what I mean by it. And in any case, I will have to do a little state-setting in order to pose the kind of problem I have in mind.

By *democracy* I mean what is often called *liberal democracy*. But the term *liberalism* is subject to so many uses that it ultimately is unhelpful. So let us use instead the term *constitutional democracy*. And by *constitutional democracy*, I mean a political order which embraces the following four broad commitments:

1. **EQUALITY:** All citizens are political equals, and thus are equal sharers in political power.
2. **ACCOUNTABILITY:** Government is accountable to its citizens, and its action must in some way reflect their collective will.
3. **MAJORITY RULE:** Collective political decision is to be made by means of regular, fair, and

open elections in which citizens (again) hold equal (voting) power, and the majority rules.

4. **LIBERTY:** But even political majorities are constrained by the rights of individuals. That is, there are some things even vast political majorities cannot do, namely violate individual rights.

To be clear, we might say that final condition is the *constitutional* element, and the former three are the democratic elements, of constitutional democracy. If we wanted to capture the essence of constitutional democracy in a nutshell, we might say that it is majority rule constrained by individual rights.

I take it that this is a familiar view of what democracy is. To be sure, philosophers who think about democracy frequently hold that democracy is *more* than this; for example, some like to add commitments to robust forms of public debate and deliberation, while others would include a commitment to certain institutions that guarantee an adequate degree of representation for cultural minorities and other groups that may lie on the margins of society. I do not mean to deny that democracy should be understood as involving further commitments than those identified above. But also I think that whatever democracy is, it is *at least* what is identified by the four commitments stated above. And these four commitments are sufficient to generate the problem I am trying to explain.

When philosophers examine a concept that is composed of several distinct commitments, they often look for ways in which those commitments could conflict. And it is obvious that there's potential for conflict among the commitments of constitutional democracy, especially between the fourth condition and the other three. Here's what I have in mind.

One of the most important individual liberties that must be secured by any political order is what is called the *liberty of conscience*. This is the freedom of individuals to live according to their own lights, within the broad constraint

that they recognize that others are entitled to the same freedom. To put the point in another way, the political order must preserve for each of us the freedom to live as we, as individuals, see fit; to decide for ourselves what makes life worth living; to form our own conception of what kind of life is truly good. In a different context, I would argue that the *liberty of conscience* provides the basis for other basic rights: rights to free speech, freedom of association, freedom of the press, and freedom of religious exercise.

And here's where the potential for conflict emerges. Liberty involves the right of each individual to live as he or she sees fit (within the broad constraint mentioned above). Democracy involves collective self-government, where we must decide *as a group* the rules by which we shall live. In a democracy, when the citizens vote, the majority rules, and those who find themselves in the minority must accept the majority's decision. This requires some to live according to rules they did not vote for, and may even strongly reject.

Now, when it comes to the relatively low-stakes matter, such as who among us will be City Dogcatcher, we might simply say to those who lose out, 'them's the breaks' or 'deal with it'. Even when it comes to more momentous matters, such as an election to select someone to hold a major office such as President or Prime Minister, we might say to those who voted for a losing candidate something like, 'You win some, you lose some. Try again in the next election.'

Perhaps such responses are sufficient. After all, you can't always get what you want. And there's a sense in which politics *just is* the collective response to that fact. Yet sometimes democracy is not simply a matter of selecting among the things we *want* or *prefer*. Sometimes, democracy engages with our deepest values and our most central moral convictions. When we are forced to live according to rules that do not accord with those convictions, we feel not merely that we have not gotten something that we want, but rather that we have *betrayed* something of the highest importance, and maybe have betrayed ourselves along the way. Naturally, this seems unacceptable to us.

You will no doubt have already sensed where this is going. The liberties secured and protected by constitutional democracy include the freedom to practice one's religion (again, within broad constraints). Citizens turn to their religious convictions for guidance or instruction on matters of fundamental moral concern, including the natures of good and evil, the purpose of life, the structure of obligation and duty, and the demands of justice. One's religion often determines one's values, and hence one's politics. It is natural, then, for citizens to appeal to their religious convictions when deciding how they should act politically. In fact, it would be odd to expect otherwise.

But consider that the *accountability* condition for democracy entails that when your government enacts laws and policies, it must be able to *tell you why* it does so. Democratic accountability requires government to be able to *justify its actions* to its citizens. And, importantly, this justification must also respect the *equality* condition. That is, the justification for government policy must be addressed to *all* citizens as *equals*.

This requires that when the government attempts to justify a policy to you, it must offer reasons *that you could recognize as reasons*. In other words, in justifying itself to you, the government is *not allowed* to act as if it were your parent. 'Because I said so' might be an appropriate response for a parent to give to a child who asks why she must go to bed at some appointed time, but in a democracy citizens are not the state's children; hence, 'because I said so' is not a successful justification of public policy. When justifying itself to you, the government must justify to *you*; it must state a reason that could count *for you*. If the government fails to justify *to you*, it treats you as some kind of underling or subordinate. And that obviously violates the equality and accountability conditions for democracy.

Something crucial follows. If 'because I said so' is not a justifying reason for governmental action, neither could 'because the Bible says so' or 'My pastor says so' be justifying reasons. Citizens are at liberty to wholly disregard the

Bible, or deny that your pastor has any moral authority at all. They may be *wrong* to do so, but someone's being wrong about the authority of the Bible of your pastor does not by itself *disqualify* his or her standing as a fellow citizen.

And now, at long last, I can state the puzzle that religious conviction poses for democratic politics. In a democracy, government policy is in some sense the product of the citizens' will. Although it's a bit of a cliché to put it this way, in a democracy we are, at least in some sense, the government. Accordingly, we are called upon to vote as a way of *instructing* government, telling officials what to do. Again, we are frequently called upon to vote on questions that invoke our deepest values and commitments. And, again, it is natural to expect that religious citizens would turn to their religious convictions for guidance on such matters. Indeed, we might go so far as to say that part of what it is to have religious convictions is to see those convictions as appropriate guides to action, including (and perhaps especially) social and political action.

And here now is the core of the problem: If it would be wrong for the government to enact policy on the basis of reasons like 'because the Bible says so', it is wrong for citizens to *vote* on the basis of their religious reasons. To see this, consider that if it would be wrong for someone to do something, then it's wrong for you to *tell* him or her to do it. And in a democracy voting is just that; a vote for policy P is a way of *telling* the government that it should adopt or enact P. It seems, then, that when deciding how to vote, religious citizens should not act on the basis of their religious convictions. However, for many religiously convicted citizens, their convictions and values are psychologically inseparable from their public life. It is *part of* the exercise of their religion to act on the basis of their religious values *in public* and *as a citizen*. To require otherwise is to require a violation of conscience, or even to unduly restrict the free exercise of religion.

It seems, then, that democracy cannot have it all. Accountability calls for the government to act only on

certain kinds of reasons, namely ones that can be shared among all of its citizens. But liberty enables citizens to live according to their consciences, which are often centrally informed by religious values that are not widely shared. And living according to one's conscience often means living according to one's convictions, both as a citizen and in private. So in order to meet the accountability condition, it looks as if democracy must violate the liberty condition. It must tell some citizens that their deepest views about justice and right are irrelevant for purposes of citizenship and thus unwelcome in deliberations about democratic decision. Put otherwise, in order to satisfy the accountability condition, democracy must require some citizens to violate their consciences. And that seems unacceptable.

What can be done? Philosophers have proposed a range of solutions, running the gamut from the simple affirmation that constitutional democracy is *secular* to the populist claim that democracy should govern on the basis of whatever reasons the majority happens to endorse. Neither of these polar views is satisfying, as each requires a serious departure from our familiar conception of democracy. If there is to be a solution, it is to be found in the attempt to propose to religious believers *religious reasons* for constraining the role of their religious commitments in public political contexts. That is, the case for keeping religion and politics separate must be a *religious case*.

One way in which this could go would be to appeal to some moral tenet within a citizen's religious view. So, for some Christian citizens, it might be possible to argue that the injunction to 'do unto others as you would have them do to you' requires them to leave their distinctively religious convictions out of their political deliberations. I imagine the religiously convicted citizens would reject the idea of living politically according to rules that can be justified only by reference to the values and principles of a religion that they reject; consequently, they may see that in acting politically on the basis of their own religious values, they seek to impose them on others, thereby forcing those others to live



according to alien religious principles. Another way would be to appeal to the idea of freedom of conscience itself, a value that is widely endorsed by religious people. The thought here would be that we must resist the impulse to force others to live against their consciences, especially when deeply important moral matters are at stake.

There are no doubt other resources within the commitments of religious citizens that could be appealed to in making a case for keeping religion and politics relatively separate. But there are two difficulties lurking. First, notice that if we attempt to give religious citizens a *religious reason* to separate religion and politics, we have, in effect, *affirmed* the idea that one's political commitments should follow from one's religious convictions. We have simply appealed to one kind of religious reason (for example, 'do unto others') in making the case for constraining the force of other religious reasons. But once we have affirmed that religious reasons are able to do the work of determining one's political behavior in this way, we open the door to the possibility that the religious might appeal to their religious convictions more broadly when deciding how to act as citizens. And so the problem reemerges.

Of course, one could argue that this difficulty is not as formidable in the real world as it may seem in theory. After all, it seems that in many modern democracies, religious citizens have accepted and internalized a kind of separation of church and state; and, accordingly, contemporary democracies seem to get along well enough. However, in the United States especially, the idea that the case for separating religion from politics should itself rest upon religious reasons looks increasingly fragile. It is increasingly common in the United States for politicians and office holders to declare that the country somehow belongs only to those who share their own religious views, or to propose what can only be described as religious tests for public office and political appointments. The idea seems to be that, if they are expressed in terms that are generic or vague enough so as to not give rise to disputes among

religious citizens of different faiths, religious reasons are fully admissible in politics. And for those of us who are without religious conviction of any kind, this gives rise to an obvious failure of accountability, one that can be addressed only by reinvestigating the idea that the separation of religion and politics itself depends upon religious reasons.

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