

Review

The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere

Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen (eds). New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 128 pp.

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Of the numerous topics current philosophy is attentive to certainly the issue of religion is central. This anthology starts with Jürgen Habermas' notion of "the public sphere" and works to connect this notion to the issue of religion. Of course, religion has long been part of the public sphere. For much of human history, people established their various formations of society and state in a manner continuous with religion. Their discourses were compact. Habermas' early works argue for a differentiation of the religious and political spheres from the public sphere that eventually overcame "representational" culture, with its authoritarianism, particularly with the rise of capitalism and then the ensuing moves towards democracy. In turn, this led for some Enlightenment thinkers, but certainly not all, to seek the overcoming of religion and its replacement with reason. This failed or at least thus far unfulfilled agenda is only part of the back story for this book. Habermas himself has clearly now decided to take on the issue of religion in "the public

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sphere” and the responses to this reconsideration come from Charles Taylor, Judith Butler, and Cornel West with concluding remarks from Craig Calhoun.

The book as a whole is an enjoyable read that raises many questions from several perspectives. Each author takes a different stance, followed by a discussion section for their interactions and disputes. Habermas’ “turn” begins to address the power of religion in “the public sphere” with an understanding of the need for a “postsecular” stance. For Habermas, this “postsecular” or “postmetaphysical” stance acknowledges the power of religion in providing meaning in peoples’ lives as well as providing motivation in challenging the global forces of capitalism while maintaining the difference between faith and reason. Understandably, however, for Habermas, the communication of religious traditions, with various values, must then be translated into a broader political culture that is universal and religious and secular at once.

Charles Taylor then steps in to challenge the notions we have of secularism. For Taylor, modern democratic societies develop and are organized around what he calls the “modern moral order.” This includes the public sphere and “the political.” Taylor argues that religion’s role in the public sphere cannot be taken as a “special case.” Treating religion as a “special case” is due in great part to the rise of secularism in the West. Taylor then goes on to offer a different conception of secularism, where the break between reason and religion is debunked. Religious and non-religious points of view can all be taken into consideration. Taylor argues for an overarching, more universal standard arrived at by his defense for a neutral state where conflicts are resolved by political consensus.

Judith Butler responds with a different approach suggesting that the public sphere itself is informed by religious traditions so much so that secularism may in fact aid religion. Using the Jewish experience as her foundation, she discusses the problems of vulnerability and injurability. The challenge then is to learn how to co-habit with different peoples, different cultures and religions yet living in the same community or nation. This co-habitation cannot be chosen. It cannot be eliminated as the Nazis sought to do with the Jews. It is a basic condition of our human existence and we must learn to live with one another on an ethical basis which becomes the basis for the public and the political.

Cornel West, of course, breaks in with a different style. Emphasizing the poetic, musical, and artistic, and deeply expressive of the Social Gospel, he discusses re-thinking

the secular through which we reach out and attempt to have empathy for the disposed within society, as he calls it, a “Prophetic Religion.” He then further suggests that our fragile experiments with democracy include both the horrors of history but also the promise of superabundance and love. This also includes dialogue with the New Atheists, and a full recognition that the dominant forms of religion usually tolerate if not promote social injustice, greed and bigotry. Thus, West falls into the tradition of a Kierkegaard. West expresses himself as a religious thinker who criticizes religion from a religious perspective, rather than that simply of a secularist or humanist whose religious criticisms often seem superficial, or, if at all religious, merely that of the more boring “healthy minded” as William James would say.

After short dialogues and discussions, there is an afterword by Craig Calhoun, who emphasizes and illustrates the dialectic between secularism and religious perspectives, pointing out the continuing activities of religious people, their values and commitments, in a pluralistic society—for better or for worse.

This book is clearly Habermasian in spirit. One will search in vain for postmodernism, psychoanalysis, or provocative Marxist or Nietzschean perspectives. There are no direct discussions of Islam, or for that matter Asian religions. No doubt, Confucian cultures would see a discussion of the power of religion in the public sphere quite differently. And, of course, there is always the question of power which is not thematically fully addressed. There is great deal of confidence in reason, and even Taylor puts forth a concept of certain universals, a sort of “Great Other” as Slavoj Žižek might call it. This is clearly a rejection of reductionist scientism, but there is also optimism here, a faith in reason. Consequently, at least in my own experience and observation, there is a general level of abstractionism (and also some privativism) that, were a critique of these assumptions offered, might invite different readings of this most pressing topic.