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WITNESSING AS AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH OF RELIGIOUS TRUTH. A COMMENT ON RAWLS'S IDEA OF COMPREHENSIVE DOCTRINES

The paper offers a critical examination of the term 'reasonable comprehensive doctrines', which is a key term in Rawls's Political Liberalism. It is argued that this term is not accurate anymore to catch the current shape of religious and secular worldviews and the nature of their truth claims, because it focuses too much on the doctrinal character of religious truth, which plays a central role in Christianity but not in many other religions and secular worldviews. However, sociologists of religion and philosopher Charles Taylor have pointed out that a shift in people's attitude towards religion has been taking place since the last decades of the twentieth century, resulting in a more existential and less doctrinal approach to religious truth. This focus on 'lived religion', inspiring the faithful to put their lives in the sign of (the truth of) these doctrines, explains why Rawls's doctrinal approach falls short of expectations in finding a response to the challenge of religious pluralism. Yet, in the conclusion of this paper it is shown that Rawls also values witnessing as an alternative, more existential approach to religious truth, although it plays a rather marginal role in his work.

Keywords: *witnessing, religious truth, comprehensive doctrine, authoritarianism, intolerance, background culture, proviso, pluralism, Charles Taylor, modernization theory.*

Introduction

The fundamental question that John Rawls intends to answer in *Political Liberalism* is: "How is it possible for those affirming a religious doctrine that is based on religious authority, for example, the Church or the Bible, also to hold a reasonable

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political conception that supports a just democratic regime?” [Rawls, 2005a: p. xxxvii]¹; see also [Rawls, 2005b: p. 458]². Since the publication of this book in 1993 this question and Rawls’s answer to it have only become more acute in the light of the rise of religious intolerance and violence in many societies around the world. This paper aims to examine an underlying aspect of this question, namely whether the term ‘reasonable comprehensive doctrines’, a collective term to indicate the plurality of deeply opposed, though reasonable religious, philosophical and moral doctrines, is accurate to catch the current shape of religions and secular worldviews and the nature of their truth claims. In particular, I will argue that Rawls’s focus on the doctrinal aspects of religion implies a bias against non-doctrinal religions and a neglect of the existential dimension of religion. In our days, the doctrinal aspect of religious truth plays a much lesser role than during a major part of the twentieth century. The shift in people’s attitude towards religion, resulting in a more existential idea of religious truth explains why Rawls’s approach, despite its obvious merits, falls short of expectations when it comes to finding a response to the challenge of religious pluralism. Yet, in the conclusion of this paper I will show that Rawls also values witnessing as an alternative, more existential approach to religious truth.

1. Rawls’s conception of comprehensive doctrines and their truth claims

Rawls characterizes a comprehensive doctrine on the basis of its scope and comprehensiveness. Such a doctrine “is general if it applies to a wide range of subjects, and in the limit to all subjects universally. It is comprehensive when it includes conceptions of what is of value in human life, and ideals of personal character, as well as ideals of friendship and of familial and associational relationships, and in the limit to our life as a whole” [PL: p. 13f.]. Comprehensive doctrines are part of the background culture, which consists of daily life and many (religious and secular) associations. Furthermore, in modern liberal democracies “a plurality of conflicting reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious, philosophical, and moral, is the normal result of a culture of free institutions,” because “a public and shared basis of justification that applies to comprehensive doctrines is lacking in the public culture of a democratic society” [IPPR: p. 441; PL: p. 61]. Finally, comprehensive doctrines are not just conflicting symbolic systems, but their adherents, just like all other people and societal associations in a given society, are reasonable, so that a rational debate about these doctrines can take place. The assumption of reasonableness implies, among others, that people “desire for its own sake a social world in which they, as free and equal, can cooperate with others on terms all can accept” [PL: p. 50]. Moreover, reasonableness is not only a necessary condition for mutual understanding and fair cooperation in the background culture, but also for reaching overlapping consensus in the public political domain.

¹ Henceforth quoted as PL.

² Henceforth quoted as IPPR.

In Rawls's view, the reasonableness of comprehensive doctrines consists of three main features. One is that it "is an exercise of theoretical reason: it covers the major religious, philosophical, and moral aspects of human life in a more or less consistent and coherent manner. It organizes and characterizes recognized values so that they are compatible with one another and express an intelligible view of the world" [PL: p. 59]. Furthermore, "in singling out which values to count as especially significant and how to balance them when they conflict, a reasonable comprehensive doctrine is also an exercise of practical reason" [Idem.]. The last feature of the reasonableness of a comprehensive doctrine is that "it normally belongs to, or draws upon, a tradition of thought and doctrine. [...] It tends to evolve slowly in the light of what, from its point of view, it sees as good and sufficient reasons" [Idem.].

Rawls marks the reasonableness of comprehensive doctrines off from their truth claims, because the latter lead to authoritarianism and exclusivism. Actually, this is one of the most important reasons why he abandoned his orthodox Christian beliefs. "To interpret history as expressing God's will, God's will must accord with the most basic ideas of justice as we know them. For what else can the most basic justice be? Thus, I soon came to reject the idea of the supremacy of the divine will as also hideous and evil" [Rawls, 2009: p. 263]. Furthermore, his reading of Jean Bodin's thoughts about toleration led him to claim that religions should be "each reasonable, and accept the idea of public reason and its idea of the domain of the political" [Rawls, 2009: p. 267]. Against this background, it is no wonder that Rawls considers the very concept of religious truth as authoritarian and intolerant, and the ensuing persecution of dissenters as the curse of Christianity. Instead, he argues, one has to accept "that politics in a democratic society can never be guided by what we see as the whole truth." Ultimately, there is no other option for a democratic society than "to live politically with others in the light of reasons all might reasonably be expected to endorse" [PL: p. 243].

These remarks show that Rawls's main reason for rejecting the notion of (religious) truth in the non-public, let alone in the public political debate is that this notion excludes other comprehensive doctrines and claims *a priori* superiority over them. Hence, if a religion imposes such a notion upon its members and/or introduces it in the (non-)public political debate, it no longer qualifies as reasonable, because it violates the principles of freedom and equality, being the most important political values of a constitutional democracy [IPRR: p. 483]³.

2. The one-sidedness of a doctrinal approach of religions and their truth claims

From the above it can be concluded that Rawls's interpretation of religious comprehensive doctrines as reasonable rests on their doctrinal character. In particular, the cognitive content of these doctrines makes it possible that they can become the

³ Rawls links this exclusivist conception of truth to the idea of a voluntarist God, whose absolute free will is the only source of all being and all moral and political values, such that only people who believe in the true God will be saved.

subject of political debates if the so-called proviso is fulfilled. This means “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 introduced are said to support” [IPRR: p. 462]. Hence, in the public political domain (religious) claims to truth have to be replaced by appeals to reasonableness. This focus on reasonable arguments for the public justification of (insights and values from) comprehensive doctrines shows that Rawls is tributary to Christian faith, in which doctrine plays a central role, and in particular to the Kantian idea of reasonable religion, as will be argued in more detail below.

The problems of Rawls's ‘Christian bias’ become apparent if one takes a broader religious perspective, thereby also including non-Christian religions. In fact, the cognitive content of comprehensive doctrines, including their truth claims, is only one of the constitutive elements of a religion, and even not the most important one. Religious truth claims cannot be reduced to an objective knowledge of the teachings of a religious tradition, accessible to everyone, including non-believers. Religions also expect the faithful to personally recognize and accept these teachings as the ultimate truth, because they offer them the way to salvation. Moreover, real faith also requires the faithful to put these teachings into practice by leading a faithful life, that is, by putting their whole existence in the sign of (the truth of) these teachings. Fourth, religions stand for bearing witness to a transcendent truth, which cannot be known through objective knowledge, but only revealed by the mystical experience of salvation and redemption through God or the divine. Last but not least, there is God as the final and absolute truth, that is, true knowledge, true being and truthful acting. All world religions incorporate most (but not necessarily all) of these dimensions, but the importance they attach to the individual dimensions differs substantially: in the Christian tradition, learning and accepting (the truth of) an objective doctrine, as formulated in the catechism and the articles of faith, plays a dominant role, while Judaism focuses on lived faith, a faithful life in accordance with the Thora, just like the Islam. The focal point of Zen Buddhism is to acquire a true insight into a transcendent truth, which surpasses ordinary, discursive reason. Finally, all monotheistic religions recognize God as the ultimate truth [Vroom, 1989: p. 302 ff.].

Although individual religions attach a different weight to the doctrinal, the practical and the mystical dimension of their tradition, they agree with each other as to how the relation between these dimensions should be conceived. The function of doctrine is to give content, orientation and coherence to the religious life of the faithful, both individually and as a community. Doctrine also serves as an introduction, which can be understood by everyone, to the objective core of a religious tradition. Yet at the same time it is clear that these religious teachings remain something external and intellectual as long as they have not been internalized and embedded in the active and contemplative life of the faithful. This implies, among others, that every religious tradition has to be interpreted and translated in the light of the specific needs of different times and places and the living conditions of the

faithful. Only in this way the teachings, moral values and ritual prescripts of a religious tradition can become living faith. This means that the identity of a religious community is not only a matter of doctrine alone, but also needs to take into account the way it is concretized in the daily life of that community.

The analysis of these aspects of religion in the broad sense and the important, yet limited role of doctrine for religious life helps us to understand why so many faithful find Rawls's focus on the doctrinal aspects of religion reductionist. This critique goes far beyond their problems with the *proviso*, which Rawls requires religions to fulfil in order to participate in the public political discussion. From a religious perspective, the *proviso* is unfair because it puts a heavier burden on religious citizens than on secular ones. Yet more importantly, religious believers find Rawls's doctrinal approach unacceptable because it affects their integrity: his reduction of their religious life to a comprehensive doctrine separates the cognitive aspect of their convictions from the way in which it is integrated into the whole of their religious existence. After all, religion is essentially a striving for integrity and integration, encompassing not only the cognitive, but also the emotional, spiritual and corporeal aspects of human existence, and even the world as a whole⁴.

Moreover, Rawls's understanding of the human person is shaped by an enlightenment understanding of rationality, according to which the human person possesses the autonomy to rise above the particularities of comprehensive doctrines and to adopt reasonable faith as the universal common ground of all individual religions⁵. This conception of reasonableness also ensures that the human person can propose general principles and standards to ensure fair cooperation and separate him- or herself from any comprehensive doctrine with final ends⁶. However, this separation of a person's public identity, in which the final ends of a specific religious tradition should not play any role, from the concrete way in which this person lives his or her non-public identity challenges the integrity of that person. This explains why religious persons are not prepared to translate the final ends and the substantial values of the tradition to which they are wholeheartedly committed into the neutral language of public reason, not only because it is unfair in comparison to secular citizens, but also because it is at odds with their existential commitment to their religious way of life.

This takes us to the broader problem of the relation between the modernization theory, which plays a decisive role in Rawls's views on society, and more recent analyses of the importance of socio-cultural identity. The term socio-cultural identity covers a wide range of culture-specific ideas and activities of individuals and communities, like a gamut of mostly implicit (moral) dos and don'ts, ways of social in-

⁴ I base my analysis of the main religious objections to Rawls's ideas about the role of religion in society on: [Vallier, 2014; Jose, 2022].

⁵ For an analysis of the role of reasonable faith in Rawls's political philosophy see: [Jonkers, 2015: pp. 221-241].

⁶ See [PL: p. 30]: "As free persons, citizens claim the right to view themselves as independent from and not identified with any particular such conception with its scheme of final ends."

teraction, patterns of solidarity, language and, of course, religious ways of life. Together they form a general horizon of meaning, against which people define who they are and where they belong; it frames their thinking and inspires their practices. According to the modernization theory, societies would evolve towards an ethos of individualism and instrumentalism, in combination with a procedural, rational and universalist ethics, and an attitude of (almost) unlimited tolerance toward the socio-cultural other. As Taylor phrases it, “the developing power of disengaged, self-responsible reason has tended to accredit a view of the subject as an unsaturated, even punctual self” [Taylor, 1989: p. 514], which has set itself free from substantial ideals of the good life and the specifics of a person’s socio-cultural identity. However, many people in our times realize that the replacement of their attachment to all kinds of substantial values by the procedural ethics of modernity has fallen short of expectations, because it fails to give them a prudent life-orientation in intricate, existential questions. In a similar vein, when confronted with the practical consequences of the strange, and sometimes even repulsive, behavior of the socio-cultural other, their initial tolerance often turns unexpectedly into a militant intolerance against the other and a rigid defence of their own socio-cultural identity. In other words, people’s attachment to their local socio-cultural identities remains much stronger than the modernization theory predicted, mainly because this theory’s view on the human person and society has failed to take into account that rationality is not something freestanding, but is always embedded in the whole of human existence. This explains why substantial values, doctrines of the good and (religious) ideals of human fulfilment continue to leave a lasting imprint on the lives of people, regardless of their assent with the universal moral standards of modernity.

The shortcomings of the modernization theory put the one-sidedness of Rawls’s views on religion in a broader societal perspective. Methodologically, his political constructivism implies that he abstracts from the way in which socio-cultural identity, including conceptions and practices of the good life, contribute to their public political views and justifications. In his view, “[t]he principles of political justice are the result of a procedure of construction in which rational persons [...] subject to reasonable conditions, adopt the principles to regulate the basic structure of society” [PL: p. xx]. The abstract and one-sided character of Rawls’s political philosophy is also evidenced from the fact that he qualifies his political conception of justice as freestanding, that is, “not presented as derived from, or as part of, any comprehensive doctrine” [PL: p. xlii]. He recognizes that people hold substantial values that may stem from different comprehensive doctrines which apply to their personal, familial and associational lives. But these values are part of the background culture and have to be strictly distinguished from the political conception and its justification [PL: p. 12].

3. Rawls’s openness to non-doctrinal approaches

The above analysis explains why Rawls’s views on the public justification of political conceptions of justice raises little enthusiasm among many faithful, including

those who live in liberal democracies. Yet interestingly, in his *The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*, Rawls discusses three alternative ways of introducing religious convictions into the public political discussion, namely declaration, conjecture and witnessing [IPRR: p. 465f]. In contrast to the public justification of these convictions through the *proviso* these alternatives do not express a form of public reasoning, but a more existential awareness. Hence, the expression of these convictions is not — or at least less — liable to the critique that Rawls's approach is too much focused on the cognitive dimension of religions. My special interest regards the third alternative, called “witnessing”, because it expresses the existential, lived character of religion best⁷. In an ideal, politically well-ordered, and fully just society it can nevertheless happen “that some citizens feel they must express their principled dissent from existing institutions, policies, or enacted legislation” [IPRR: p. 466fn], and this despite their fundamental acceptance of constitutional democracy and their abiding by its legitimate laws. By way of illustration Rawls refers to the pacifism of the Quakers and the Catholic opposition to abortion. His use of the term “feel” in this context is intriguing, because it shows his awareness that religious convictions can be expressed in a more existential way than by means of a rational justification through public reasoning. Witnessing means that “[w]hile on the whole citizens endorse reasonable conceptions of justice supporting a constitutional democracy, in this case they nevertheless feel that they must not only let other citizens know the deep basis of their strong opposition but must also bear witness to their faith by doing so” [Idem]. The reason for these people to make a stand for their faith through witnessing is that they have run out of reasons in the public political debate in favour of pacifism or against abortion, but nevertheless feel the need to express their deep existential commitment to these truths, in the hope it will touch the same existential string with people of a different (reasonable) conviction on these matters. This is what is called witnessing to one's lived faith or, in a broader context, one's socio-cultural identity, not only through words, but often also through symbolic deeds.

A striking example of what bearing witness to pacifism means is a legendary picture of a black woman, Ieshia Evens, protesting peacefully against the use of excessive force against black citizens by the police in Baton Rouge on July 10, 2016. Her personal comments show that she bears (existential) witness to a (religious) truth, thus manifesting the limitations of rational argument⁸.

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⁷ Unfortunately, Rawls discusses this alternative only in a footnote. See: [IPRR: p. 466fn.].

⁸ For more information see: <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/07/a-single-photo-that-captures-race-and-policing-in-america/490664/>

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