

Political Theologies of Liberalism

"Moving well beyond Schmitt and even Rosenzweig, to Tillich, Chesterton, Zizek, Rawls, Vattimo, and more, these papers expand the domain of "political theology" and "theological politics" in ways that should contribute to yet further deepening of serious thought about the power of religious and theological thinking in secular contexts."—Dr. Bonnie Honig

Weakening Liberalism: Rawls, Pluralism, and the "Fact of Oppression"

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Abstract: This work situates Rawls' discussions of pluralism and the creation of a metaphysically neutral political space in the context of contemporary philosophical controversies surrounding deconstructive pluralism and engages in an evaluation and creative re-appropriative reading of that discussion. This reading shows that the secularizing character of liberal discourse, nominally limited to the realm of political discussion, in fact infiltrates the comprehensive worldviews with which it comes in contact, engendering, if not doubt or indifference, at least a sense of intellectual humility and an awareness of the contingency of one's cherished perspectives.

Keywords: Rawls, pluralism, anti-essentialism, Vattimo, neutrality

Rawls' notion of pluralism represents a point of sublime provocation. On the one hand, his discussion of this topic, especially in his *Political Liberalism*, prompts criticisms from all sides of the political theoretical spectrum, portrayed (a) as insufficiently pluralistic by those who point to Rawls' insistence on shared standards of discourse by which a safe space for public political discussion might be held open, (b) as insufficiently neutral by those who feel that Rawls labels as neutral a proposed structure of discourse that is very much the product of his own (contingent) comprehensive views (and, indeed, one that perhaps unfairly privileges those views), and (c) as insufficiently productive of political action by

those who take Rawls' claim to neutrality seriously but suggest that this neutrality, if enacted, would bring to an end all meaningful political action in favor of endless, impotent, discursive play. On the other hand, Rawls' articulation of the means by which a neutral, shared space for discourse could coexist with and encourage the development of disparate comprehensive worldviews represents a valuable effort to provide a non-totalizing common ground by which cross-cultural social and political cooperation become possible. Situating Rawls's discussions of pluralism and the creation of a metaphysically neutral political space in the context of contemporary philosophical controversies surrounding deconstructive pluralism allows us to engage in an evaluation and creative re-appropriation of that discussion. This evaluative process culminates in the construction of an argument that, in spite of Rawls's best efforts, collapses into a sort of comprehensive, deconstructive position. Furthermore, if we allow that collapse to take place, Rawls's account (with some slight rehabilitation informed by the thought of Bonnie Honig and Gianni Vattimo) reveals itself as capable of grounding cross-cultural cooperation and maintaining an anti-essentializing, non-violent pluralism.

Today's emancipatory politics finds itself defined, for better or worse, by the issue of pluralism. Indeed, the proliferation of identitarian categories and the increasing degree to which worldviews and groups are capable of publicly articulating themselves increasingly calls into question the practical possibility of establishing universalizable political, ethical, or even epistemological norms. Correspondingly, the confrontation with difference produced by the proliferation and expression of views explicitly affiliated with identity groups has, in the last fifty

or sixty years, likewise occasioned a renaissance of critical theoretical inquiry bent on exposing the hegemonic character of the universalizing projects of modernity (and, some more ambitious theorists would argue, the virtual entirety of the “Plato-to-Kant Canon”). This trajectory of inquiry—embodied in the distinct but broadly compatible projects grouped, somewhat unhelpfully, under such titles as “(eliminative) postmodernity,” “deconstruction,” and any number of hyphenated offshoots of “theory,” as well as in the deflationary accounts of philosophy offered by certain strains within the Anglophone philosophical traditions—questions not only the possibility of establishing a universalizable intellectual-cum-social system by which to ground a cross-culturally acceptable politics of emancipation, but also the very desirability of attempting to do so. The specter of imperialism, we are cautioned, haunts even the most well-intentioned of (attempted) Intellectual/Socio-Political Grand Projects, stubbornly resisting both our efforts to exorcise it and our desire to ignore it in our desperation to address the many and varied problems facing both human civilization and the shared Earth upon which we reside.¹

Frustratingly, the simple abandonment of those universalizing projects called into question by the circumstances of pluralism and the self-critical, deconstructionist move prompted by those circumstances are themselves fraught with problems. Indeed, to simply abandon universality in the name of an embrace of a contingency that precludes all cross-cultural judgments seems to run the risk of a collapse, if not into banal relativism (from which we are kept, at least, by the

¹ It is worth mentioning a stylistic idiosyncrasy here: My employment of the term “we” is not intended to suggest that I am representing anyone other than myself. Rather, it is meant to suggest my treatment of the work as a collaboration between author and reader, to solicit creative interpretations, and to offer up the work as an appropriable resource.

specificity and inescapability of our own cultural/intellectual circumstances), at least into a condition of radical isolation from one another. If our systems of intellection are always and inescapably inflected by our cultural/intellectual circumstances, and if these systems are the only means by which discursive meaning is impressed upon what is essentially a contentless world (perhaps in the late Heideggerian vein of a world in which beings exist and, in a more or less mysterious fashion, solicit the imposition of discursive content upon them but utterly lack any shared, discernable content of their own by which we might gain access to universalizable realization about how the world really is), then we seemingly find ourselves deprived of the common ground necessary in order to engage productively with those operating within different systems. Indeed, according to this model, cross cultural communication would seem to be either impossible (which prompts the uncomfortable skeptical move of supposing that what appears to be cross cultural communication is, in a certain sense at least, not truly communicative) or deeply suspect on the grounds that any attempt at communication carries with it the ineradicable risk of intellectual imperialism. Even if we are to accept, reluctantly, the reality of (at least somewhat effective) cross-cultural communication and cooperation, the hermeneutic (over-) sensitivity described above would seem to deprive that reality of any theoretical weight: productive cross cultural discourse, to the extent that it does occur, becomes something for which we are unable to account and, as such, remains unable to banish a skepticism that calls into question whether that discourse is not concealing some flaw, some terrible misunderstanding or sublimated hegemonic impulse

waiting to erupt into the world of lived experience with the most sanguinary of political and social consequences.

The isolation that results from these concerns, in turn, produces conditions of terrible social and political vulnerability. Even where efforts at political and social cooperation are not deliberately forestalled by concerns over the possibility and potential consequences of intercultural discourse (as certainly seems to occur, especially in the context of political movements by marginalized groups, in which participation by members of less-marginalized or dominant groups becomes uneasy, calling up as it does the specter of paternalism), those efforts find themselves deprived of theoretical legitimacy at best and the object of a constant and disruptive (self-)critical hermeneutics of suspicion at worst. In addition to inhibiting positive political and social action, this disunity likewise makes the groups at issue vulnerable to the agency of counter-emancipatory power structures:

Indeed, if 'deconstructive pluralism' deprives us of connectivity, of a common reality, this will lead to irresponsibility, detached irony and finally to the loss of humanity. This, with David Griffin's so called, 'eliminative pluralism' furthers yet another form of imperialism, the 'right of the most powerful' to conquer this indifferent plurality for selfish purposes. In the sense of Foucault, this is what the Empire does: it defines knowledge by the regime of the powerful.²

The division produced by what begins as a compassionate desire to avoid hegemonic intellectual and social conduct eventually produces imperialisms of a different sort. The first imperialism is that of a sort of indifference according to which the Other becomes merely an appropriable resource by which to define one's own cultural/social/intellectual position. The second imperialism (which of course

² Roland Faber, "In the Wake of False Unifications: Whitehead's Creative Resistance Against Imperialist Theologies" (Center for Process Studies, Claremont) March, 31, 2005, 12

follows the first) is the exploitation of the resulting disunity (in which, due to indifference, the various groups are deprived of even the motive force by which to act separately in compatible or broadly sympathetic ways) by any force for whom the lack of a means of cross-cultural mediation stands (in the manner of a perverse, ersatz objectivity) as a license to let slip a will-to-power bent on dominion and exploitation. Imperialism, far from being banished, emerges or, perhaps more correctly, is born anew, unshackled from the paternalizing conceits that have defined it historically and revealed it to be pure and unadulterated aggression.

Even if, in a fit of optimism, we find ourselves reluctant to suppose that, even in the context of the frustration that results from the inability of theory to ground the sort of cross- or trans-cultural activity upon which the hopes of generations of thinkers have been hung, the naked will-to-power described above could ever emerge out of a plurality defined, indeed produced, by an increasing sensitivity to the threat of the very imperialism it would represent, we are nonetheless confronted with still other concerns. Specifically, even if one of the discrete parties within the sort of pluralism we have envisioned did not engage in the sort of imperialism at issue above, plurality itself remains vulnerable to forceful re-appropriation. As Badiou observes, hegemonic capitalism (which itself operates unencumbered by concerns of universality or particularity) could hardly find a better marketing opportunity than that which is represented by the proliferation of identitarian categories embodied in contemporary, anti-essentialist pluralism:

For each identification (the creation or cobbling together of identity) creates a figure that provides material for investment by the market...What inexhaustible potential for mercantile investment in this upsurge-taking the form of communities demanding recognition

and so-called cultural singularities-of women, homosexuals, the disabled, Arabs! And these infinite combinations of predicative traits, what a godsend! Black homosexuals, disabled Serbs, Catholic pedophiles, moderate Muslims, married priests, ecologist yuppies, the submissive unemployed, prematurely aged youth! Each time, a social image authorizes new products, specialized magazines, improved shopping malls, 'free' radio stations, targeted advertizing networks, and finally, heady 'public debates' at peak viewing times. Deleuze put it perfectly: capitalist deterritorialization requires a constant reterritorialization.³

Thus, even if the isolation engendered by a pluralism which distrusts all efforts at universality does not give rise to new instantiations of the nationalistic/identity-driven imperialisms which characterized much of Western history, it may nonetheless remain open to exploitation by supra-national forces such as capitalism and technocratic organizational hegemony (that is, the creeping reduction of subjects, concepts, and objects to mere instrumentalities that was of such concern to figures like the later Heidegger and Marcuse). Indeed, this vulnerability transcends the merely negative one described with reference to the possible repetition of old nationalist imperialisms insofar as it does not merely entail the impossibility of the sort of cross-cultural cooperation necessary for effective resistance but also the availability of resources by which counter-emancipatory forces can actively perpetuate themselves.

In the context of the admittedly serious difficulties associated with the adoption of an embrace of pluralism founded upon a concern with and desire to avoid imperialistic dysfunction in cross-cultural relations, it is perhaps unsurprising that this adoption has, increasingly, been called into question. Indeed, it is worth

³ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism* (Stanford University Press, Stanford) 2003, 10

observing that the charge of political inefficacy or vulnerability to re-appropriation by oppressive structures is one that has taken on a vigor which, in recent decades, has allowed it to slip the bonds of purely philosophical speculation and cascade violently into both cross-disciplinary discourse within the Academy and into the broader culture. Faced with the shortcomings of the sort of strident anti-essentialism that characterizes the deconstructive approach to pluralism outlined above (an approach frequently derided by way of the increasingly vacuous and popularized term “relativism”), many thinkers, disciplines, and public figures agitate for “renewal” in the form of a return to various metaphysical, essentializing projects, an impulse that manifests within the Academy as a breakdown of communication between different schools of thought within disciplines and, in extreme cases, between disciplines (as manifest, for instance, in the “Sokal Hoax”) and within the broader society in the rise of various metaphysically inflected fundamentalisms.

Of course, however motivated it might be by the apparent political and social inefficacy of the deconstructive approach to pluralism, the mere return to essentialism is itself a font of socio-political danger. The possibility of the return of imperialism is only the most obvious example of this danger. Indeed, for all their dissatisfaction with the “relativism” to which they loudly and habitually oppose themselves, essentialist groups in general and fundamentalists in particular paradoxically instantiate the very identitarian disunity that is one of the principle objects of focus for that opposition. This in turn brings to light the totalitarian character of these movements: if disunity is a problem born of pluralism and the

anti-essentialist acceptance of it, then the solution is precisely the eradication, by whatever means, of plurality. As Rawls puts it,

[A general fact] is that a continuing and shared understanding of one comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine can be maintained only by the oppressive use of state power. If we think of political society as a community united in affirming one and the same comprehensive doctrine, then the oppressive use of state power is necessary for political community. In the society of the Middle Ages, more or less united in affirming the Catholic faith, the Inquisition was not an accident; its suppression of heresy was needed to preserve that shared religious belief. The same holds, I believe, for any reasonable comprehensive philosophical or moral doctrine, whether religious or nonreligious. A society united on a reasonable form of utilitarianism, or on the reasonable liberalism of Kant or Mill, would likewise require sanctions of state power to remain so. Call this 'the fact of oppression.'⁴

The return of fundamentalist efforts to produce social unity by way of an enforced intellectual, cultural, spiritual, or social hegemony, then, is precisely a call to a return to the state-supported oppression by which such uniformity, traditionally, has been established.

Of course, we might wonder why it is that the only path to this sort of social unity (that is, social unity produced by a shared, comprehensive worldview) is by way of the oppressive function of state power. After all, we might wish to concede the possibility that such unity might be brought about by more or less non-coercive means: perhaps by way of the gradual conversion of the whole of society to this or that comprehensive worldview. Indeed, we can find no shortage of advocates of this nominally peaceful method of unification, from the (again, nominally) apolitical religious missionary to the proponent of scientism for whom the triumph of (a

⁴ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism: Expanded Edition* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2005) 37 (Henceforth *Political Liberalism*)

reductionist and absolutizing) science is merely a matter of time as the populace gradually gains more and better access to information through various heretofore unavailable electronic media. Faced with such figures, we might well be inclined to concede that government power, at least according to the self-understanding of certain otherwise totalizing and universalizing movements, is not a necessary step in the production of a society united in the acceptance of a particular comprehensive worldview. Indeed, we might even go so far as to find in the efforts to achieve universality by these nonviolent means an important motive force for the establishment and maintenance of a liberal, broadly non-coercive social order.

Rawls' account of the fact of oppression is tied to his suggestion that conflict regarding comprehensive doctrines is ineradicable. Specifically, Rawls suggests that the socio-political unity by way of philosophical/spiritual unity sought by the proponents of totalizing/universalizing movements is impossible to achieve merely by means of rational discussion. He writes,

Religious and philosophical doctrines express views of the world and of our life with one another, severally and collectively, as a whole. Our individual and associative points of view, intellectual affinities, and affective attachments, are too diverse, especially in a free society, to enable those doctrines to serve as the basis of lasting and reasoned political agreement. Different conceptions of the world can reasonably be elaborated from different standpoints and diversity arises in part from our distinct perspectives. It is unrealistic-or worse, it arouses mutual suspicion and hostility-to suppose that all our differences are rooted solely in ignorance and perversity, or else in the rivalries for power, status, or economic gain.⁵

If the controversies regarding our philosophical and political comprehensive views cannot be resolved due to the particularity of the circumstances that inform us as

⁵ Ibid, 58

subjects, those conflicts would seem, then, to be impossible to eradicate by mere persuasion. That reasonable people can disagree on issues of comprehensive doctrine in turn produces “the fact of oppression,” the only means by which to generate a social order founded on agreement. This fact of oppression then comes to be the enforcement of that agreement by the only organization with the power to enforce the agreement, which, in the context of modernity, is usually the nation-state (although, as Rawls observes, other institutions, notably religious institutions, have played this role in the past and we can certainly imagine different structures, perhaps particularly powerful corporations, playing a similar role in the future).

The sanction of force, in the form of both intellectual and physical violence, proves a necessary means of suppressing differences that are irresolvable by means of discussion. Rawls’ mention of the Inquisition is not accidental and the threat of political and religious violence is clearly something with which he is concerned, but we should acknowledge that, for Rawls, while violence can certainly take the form of the tortures that come to mind when the image of the Inquisition is invoked, it can also take a variety of more subtle forms, such as the construction of political institutions and practices along exclusionary lines. For Rawls, “Political power is always coercive power,” even if that power falls well short of death camps and firing squads.⁶ If people can reasonably disagree on issues related to comprehensive doctrines, then the only means by which to prompt social harmony would seem to be to employ means other than reasoning. By this reckoning, the peaceful proponents of mass conversion as a means of producing an intellectually or

⁶ Ibid, 68, Emphasis mine.

spiritually homogenous society are engaged in an unrealistic project. Their hopeful ambitions are destined to be frustrated by the ineradicable differences in perspective that produce pluralism in the first place and, in their failure, these proponents of totality are forced to choose between the abandonment of their universalizing ambitions or the adoption of different and altogether more violent methods of bearing them out.

It is in light of the impossibility of producing a unified society built upon a shared comprehensive worldview by any means short of violence that Rawls' articulates his notion of political liberalism. Rawls proposes a system that bypasses our irreconcilable controversies with respect to comprehensive doctrines by hanging his hope for a well ordered society not on widespread agreement on comprehensive, metaphysical claims but rather on the acceptance of provisional, metaphysically neutral political claims upon which social order can be produced and maintained even in the midst of a dizzying plurality of comprehensive worldviews. In this way, Rawls seeks to sidestep the conflict between those focused on the importance of difference and the autonomy of identitarian groups (whose position, as we have seen, risks a collapse into political impotence and vulnerability) and those focused on political efficacy through the reestablishment of some sort of universalizing project (whose position correspondingly risks a collapse into intellectual-cum-socio-political totalitarianism). Instead of employing our varied metaphysical positions in public discourse, we are instead called to allow those positions to "give way" before political articulations comprehensible and broadly

acceptable to a plurality of such worldviews.⁷ This effort to establish a metaphysically neutral ground in which various reasonable (with “reasonable” here indicating a willingness/ability to leave metaphysical questions out of the public sphere in the manner required by liberal discourse) metaphysical positions can coexist while still having shared access to mechanisms of political and social power assumes a diffuse character, with power invested not in a centralized, metaphysically interested authority but precisely in the play of popular discourse that arises in the context of a plurality of comprehensive views willing to embrace a shared, safe, neutral standard of public discourse.⁸

It is worth noting that, per our earlier consideration of some of the difficulties associated with absolutizing, by universalizing comprehensive worldviews (that is, those worldviews that refuse the standards of neutral political discourse upon which Rawls hangs his hopes for political and social cooperation in the context of pluralism), Rawls’ effort is very much motivated by an inclination to avoid the disunity and violence that he associates with those worldviews and, more generally, with efforts to create social and political harmony by way of the hegemonic establishment of this or that comprehensive worldview. As Jean Hampton puts it,

Rawls gives us no precise definition of what he means by ‘metaphysical.’ From context it doesn’t seem that he can mean it in the positivists’ sense of ‘nonsense to be dismissed’ but, rather, in a more Hobbesian sense, as “doctrines for which an incontrovertible demonstration is not possible.’ Such doctrines have the potential to arouse controversy and provoke conflict in the community. Note that Rawls might have to count even certain theories of science, such as

⁷ Ibid, 10

⁸ Ibid, 68

the thesis that species have evolved, to be part of metaphysics so understood if they have been heavily contested by the community... But whatever else falls into this category of metaphysics, certainly normative ethics, and metaethics fall into it.⁹

Rawls' embrace of neutrality, then, is one motivated precisely by a desire to avoid the social and political conflict that he takes to be a necessary consequence of efforts to universalize metaphysical, comprehensive systems upon which, thanks to our particularity and our corresponding placement of different levels of ethical weight upon particular items of concern, universal agreement is simply not possible.

It is here that Rawls' account becomes problematic at several levels. Firstly, it is questionable whether Rawls' metaphysically neutral political space is truly so innocent of comprehensive affiliations as he seems to suggest. As Vattimo is wont to remind us, even the idea of a "secularized" space (with secularity here having a meaning broadly compatible with Rawls' conception of metaphysical neutrality) is very much rooted in the contingent expression of a particular cultural tradition:

European society is on average lay and secularized, but in terms of a fairly explicit Christian heritage. This becomes clear when confronting persons or groups rooted in different traditions, who perceive [European] secularity as deeply marked by a specific religious origin. Liberalism believed that religion could be set aside by relegating it to the private sphere of feeling and faith, which does not 'interfere' with political choices and the normal dialectic of power. Yet this separation succeeded only because it was realized on the solid, if unacknowledged, basis of a common religious heritage.¹⁰

The notion of a safe space for discourse which lives on in the Western, secularized democratic tradition would seem to be indelibly marked by a particular notion of hospitality which finds its roots firmly planted in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

⁹ Jean Hampton, "Should Political Philosophy be Done Without Metaphysics?" *Ethics* 99: 4, (August 1989), 794-795

¹⁰ Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2002), 95

Indeed, the lasting marks of this association certainly go a long way towards accounting for the suspicion with which non-Western cultures confront the invitation to engage in “neutral,” secularized discourse.

Curiously, this historical connection is explicitly articulated by Rawls himself. For Rawls, the possibility of liberal constitutionalism arose as a result of contingent historical circumstances in the West. Specifically, Rawls notes that the calling into question of Roman Catholic authority by the Reformation and the corresponding development of theological grounds for religious toleration introduced the very possibility of a non-violent, non-totalizing confrontation with pluralism that lives on in Western constitutional democratic forms (and, presumably, represents—in a fashion disturbingly reminiscent of paternalistic colonialism—the West’s “gift” to the broader world): “The historical origin of political liberalism (and of liberalism more generally) is the Reformation and its aftermath, with the long controversies over religious toleration in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”¹¹ While we might be tempted to regard this as a mere accident of history (as, indeed, Rawls himself seems to) we are nonetheless struck by the degree to which these historical and theological circumstances continue to inform the liberal project to the point where that project, born of religious thought, comes in turn to itself occasion the development of new forms of Christian doctrine:

The success of liberal constitutionalism came as a discovery of a new social possibility: the possibility of a reasonably harmonious and stable pluralist society. Before the successful and peaceful practice of toleration in societies with liberal institutions there was no way of knowing of that possibility. It is more natural to believe, as centuries-long practice of intolerance appeared to confirm, that social unity and

¹¹ *Political Liberalism*, xxiv

concord requires agreement on a general and comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine. Intolerance was accepted as a condition of social order and stability. The weakening of that belief helps to clear the way for liberal institutions. Perhaps the doctrine of free faith developed because it is difficult, if not impossible, to believe in the damnation of those with whom we have, with trust and confidence, long and fruitfully cooperated in maintaining a just society.¹²

While Rawls mentions, as an aside, the origin of free faith's development in the context of the success of pluralistic, liberal societies, the comment reveals a far more intimate connection between the two than Rawls would like to acknowledge. Indeed, even in the context of the Lockean tradition of liberal thought, freedom of religion was conceived not as an incidental response to pluralism or an effort at true religious neutrality, but as a means of providing a setting for the development of particular, explicitly Christian religious ways of being (Locke's own political theory pairs with his attempt to articulate a Latitudinarian Theology by which the disunity of Protestant Christianity could be amended within a context permitted by liberal democratic institutions).

Of course, it may well be objected that the association between Christianity and liberalism is merely an incidental one and, as such, should not be taken as a barrier to the cross-cultural space that liberals wish to create. Certainly, there is a sense in which this is true, especially if we are reluctant to claim, with Vattimo, that the liberal concern with the avoidance of violence too is the product of Christian *caritas* rather than a somewhat more universalizable, if still non-totalizing, shared vulnerability characteristic of the broader human condition, as Rawls would like to suggest. Not even a view that represents an attempt at neutrality can come from a

¹² *Political Liberalism*, xxv

cultural vacuum. Indeed, Rawls's excellent discussion of the genealogy of liberalism is precisely meant as a means of acknowledging this point.

The problem arises only when we fail to recognize the degree to which the admittedly contingent circumstances from which liberalism arose continue to leave their mark upon liberal theory and, indeed, upon the very notion of neutrality that is at the center of a certain sort of liberal theory. Certainly the very reality of cross-cultural communication (to the extent to which it does occur) testifies to the fact that the cultural specificity of concepts like "liberalism" and "neutrality" need not be limited in utilization to those cultures in which they originated or to cross-cultural or international spaces. This application, if it is to be kept from degrading into imperialism or misunderstanding, must be guided by an awareness of and corresponding ability to address the degree to which the concepts at issue are still inflected by the tradition from which they did emerge. As Honig puts it, "[I]f we expect hospitality always to harbor a trace of its double-hostility-then proponents of hospitality will always be on the lookout for that trace and its remainders."¹³ It may, after all, be possible to assuage the concerns of non-Westerners invited to partake in a "neutral" discourse after the liberal fashion if Westerners themselves acknowledge the mark of their traditions upon that discourse and concede that a part of achieving something closer to true neutrality might be precisely a willingness to participate less actively in those discourses than they otherwise would. This self-restraint would certainly go a long way towards achieving something closer to a neutral space insofar as it would help to alleviate the disadvantages that burden non-

¹³ Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009), 120

Westerners seeking to participate in dialogue within said space (notably, a lack of familiarity with the language of secularized political discourse).¹⁴

Even if we have managed to mitigate somewhat the degree to which Rawls's neutral space in fact remains inflected by the tradition from which it emerges, the cost of participating in that space remains itself highly problematic. The possibility of reasonable disagreement and its relationship to the "fact of oppression" seem to suggest that, insofar as disagreement is ineradicable by reason, those who wish to promote a society governed according to a particular comprehensive worldview are forced to either realize that desire by violent means or abandon it altogether. Yet Rawls also claims that the abandonment of the desire to force one's comprehensive views upon society need not entail the casting off or even weakening of those comprehensive views. Indeed, Rawls himself acknowledges that "it would be fatal to the idea of a political conception to see it as skeptical about, or indifferent to, truth, much less as in conflict with it" since "[s]uch skepticism or indifference would put political philosophy in opposition to numerous comprehensive doctrines, and thus defeat from the outset its aim of achieving an overlapping consensus."¹⁵ Rawls goes so far as to suggest that the experience of operating in a pluralistic context actually facilitates the development of comprehensive doctrines (we have already seen what he takes to be the implications of liberal pluralism for a certain sort of Christian theologizing).¹⁶ Upon closer examination, it will become apparent that Rawls's discussion of the irresolvable character of conflicts centered on comprehensive

¹⁴ Honig, 119

¹⁵ *Political Liberalism*, 150

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 128-129

doctrines and his claim that the adoption of a metaphysical neutral political philosophy need not inhibit the development or consideration of those doctrines pose interesting problems for each other.

While Rawls wishes to claim that the bracketing of political discourse from discourse regarding the truth or falsity of comprehensive doctrines nonetheless allows the latter sort of discourse to survive and thrive, it is difficult to see how this is possible. We must not forget that, for Rawls, the very value of political liberalism is grounded in the recognition that conflicts regarding comprehensive doctrines are impossible to resolve by way of reason and thus can only be suppressed violently or given a secularized, neutral, and apolitical space in which to flourish. To adopt liberalism on these grounds, however, necessarily entails, contrary to Rawls's assertions, a weakening of comprehensive doctrines. Specifically, one is forced to concede that one's doctrines cannot be universalizable except through unacceptable, coercive means. This concession, in turn, entails the abandonment of the idea of a peaceful universalization of one's viewpoint, leaving one with the choice between either accepting coercion as one's only means of bringing about the hegemony of one's perspective or modifying that perspective such that it no longer strives towards universality at all.

It is worth taking a moment to consider just what the abandonment of the possibility of the universalization of one's viewpoint actually entails. The most proximate consequence of this abandonment is the necessity for dogmatic revision: if a creed endorses or requires the universalization of a particular set of beliefs (by whatever means) that requirement must be done away with. More importantly, the

inability of comprehensive worldviews to become universally accepted through the use of reason is taken by Rawls to be the result of the unique composition of individual human subjects. If we take this account seriously, we find ourselves confronted not only by a merely practical limit on the degree to which we might promulgate a given belief, but also by an essentially deconstructive (and, as we shall see later, comprehensive) account of the character of belief as such. By this account, comprehensive doctrines and the individual beliefs of which they are composed are necessarily contingent products of historical circumstance, accepted or rejected based largely on the exigencies of our individual subjectivities. To accept Rawls's account of why beliefs cannot be universalized, then, is to similarly accept a highly deflationary account of what belief is.

Returning now to the more proximate of the aforementioned consequences of the abandonment of a belief in the possibility of the universalization of a particular comprehensive worldview, we can see that those individuals for whom the universalization of a particular comprehensive view is an important or indispensable part of that view (a category into which we can certainly fit many worldviews, religious and otherwise) are actually placed in a situation in which violence seems to be the only viable option if the worldview in question is to remain uncompromised. Thus, these groups are forced, by the assumptions underlying Rawls's discussion of the permanent character of pluralism, either to adopt what Rawls takes to be an irrational stance and thus become outsiders (who are then likely to be crushed beneath the superior collective resources of the more moderate or adaptable worldviews that make up the broad consensus at the core of a liberal

society) or to abandon a cherished aspect of their belief system (and one which may, in their own self-understanding at least, entail a desire for peaceful mass conversion rather hegemonic violence) in order to have a “seat at the table.”

Likewise, the exclusion or comprising of comprehensive views characterized by a desire to bring about a society dominated by their worldview in turn does away with a great part of the motive force behind the establishment and maintenance of liberal societies. We can easily imagine groups who aspire to the peaceful, universalization-by-persuasion of their particular comprehensive worldviews who would be great champions of a secularized liberal space insofar as that space would allow them to pursue their goals free from the threat of violent repression by other, perhaps more immediately powerful groups. For Rawls, however, the neutral space that liberalism creates is motivated precisely by the belief that worldviews are not able to gain hegemony in this way and that these worldviews will, sooner or later, become frustrated by the futile task of attempting to win over the whole of society and turn to more sanguinary methods. If our hypothetical conversion-focused worldview were to accept the impossibility of the universalization of itself by peaceful methods, its adherents would likewise lose their motivation for helping to create and hold open a neutral space (since what they intended to use that space for, namely, the protection of their own universalizing project, would no longer make sense). On the other hand, if they did not accept the Rawlsian assumption of the persistence of intellectual conflict, they would likewise surely be disinclined to participate in a liberal system built upon that assumption, because that system and those within it who accept Rawls’s suppositions would inevitably regard the group

at issue with great suspicion, watching them carefully lest the group's universalizing impulse give rise to violence (certainly we see this sort of suspicion frequently leveled against religiously motivated political actors in Western political and social discourses).

While any liberal project is rightly at pains to remain as open to different groups as possible, particularly when those groups are well motivated to facilitate, insofar as is possible, the creation and maintenance of liberal structures and institutions, it may be that the exclusion of groups interested in universalizing their comprehensive views is a pill that we should be willing to swallow. We would certainly do well to observe that, in spite of the best of intentions, groups guided by hegemonic ideological impulses do not have a terribly promising history of remaining peaceful in the face of what can seem an unintelligible intransigence on the part of those they wish to convert. The "fact of oppression" and the persistence of pluralism together conspire to form a picture of human relations that reveals as potentially dangerous and dysfunctional the very idea of totalizing, absolute worldviews.

It would seem, then, that Rawls' avowedly neutral liberalism can be read as embodying a kind of comprehensive anti-essentialism. In spite of Rawls's assertions to the contrary, absolutizing beliefs, even avowedly peaceful ones, cannot fit unproblematically into a secularized, liberal society. Those who hold such beliefs are faced with the prospect of either modifying (which is to say weakening) their beliefs such that they are able to fit into a liberal society by giving up on the very idea of universalization, or facing exclusion from liberal society (and possibly the

formation of a society governed along alternative, violent lines). Hence, entry into the liberal community means, for large numbers of adherents to a wide range of creeds, the abandonment of universality in favor of an acceptance that their respective viewpoints are 1) the contingent products of the particularities of their subjective constitution (which is, by Rawls's lights, what accounts for the irresolvable character of pluralism) and 2) incapable of triumphing save at the unacceptably high cost of the imposition of violent hegemony. It would seem that the secularizing character of liberal discourse, nominally limited to the realm of political discussion, in fact infiltrates the comprehensive worldviews with which it comes in contact, engendering, if not doubt or indifference, at least a sense of intellectual humility and an awareness of the contingency of one's cherished perspectives.

Rawls's liberalism and, specifically, the metaphysically neutral space that it seeks to create, would seem to demand of believers a terribly high price. As we have seen, participation in liberal society and acceptance of the motive for its existence and the principles underlying it seem to necessitate that belief systems be willing to engage in a project of auto-deconstruction, abandoning totalizing conceits and accepting their contingency and their limited status as one party in what will always be a pluralistic society. Under such circumstances, a collapse into relativism or skepticism seems a very real possibility. Even if Rawls's articulation of political reason suggests that a relativism with respect to more comprehensive doctrines would not produce the sort of political vulnerabilities at issue, say, in deconstructive

postmodernity, it is hard to believe that such a widespread dissolution of organized belief systems would be without social, cultural, and political costs.

The answer to this concern rests with the precise character of the weakening of belief required by Rawlsian liberalism. After all, an acceptance of contingency and an abandonment of universality need not lead to the destruction even of a belief system that has traditionally placed an emphasis on totality and universalizability. Indeed, as Honig reminds us, even traditionally or avowedly totalitarian structures can, with enough creativity and hermeneutic lightness, be mined for emancipatory potential. Honig offers us an example of such creative interpretation-cum-appropriation (albeit not in the context of adapting to the demands of political liberalism) arising from within a particular religious tradition, when recalling

[T]he strategy whereby rabbinical interpreters in effect abolished the death penalty in Judaism. Working within biblical law, divinely authored, the Rabbis could not simply change the law. They had to be more subtle and creative than that. So instead, they legalized the death penalty out of existence, creating such demanding procedural requirements that no one could be sentenced to death under the law.¹⁷

This sort of creative interpretation is precisely the means by which the proponents of formerly totalizing, illiberal comprehensive worldviews could perform the sort of self-weakening necessary to enter into a liberal society while still affirming the distinctive character of their worldviews and the solidarity of the communities that have grown around them. Such emancipatory re-imaginings would require both a great deal of theoretical subtlety and a great deal of (for lack of a better term) pastoral oversight in order to produce both effectively emancipatory readings of

¹⁷ Honig, 76-77

particular theories and facilitate the participation of the broader community in the development, criticism, and bearing out of those readings. Though obviously challenging, such efforts offer those willing to undertake them the promise of a more productive engagement with the broader society and, indeed, offers such groups a chance to develop the tools by which to elicit emancipatory messages from laws in civil discourses even as they do so from comprehensive doctrines in private discourses (and, indeed, Honig illustrates the diverse applicability of this sort of re-appropriative reading by referencing both the religious and civil examples of creative, emancipatory reinterpretations of laws and policies).¹⁸

Similarly, the abandonment of the totalitarian character of a belief system can occasion not only a more productive intercourse between that system and other systems (which, up to the point of this abandonment, it could only have regarded as threats) but also a more fulfilling meditation by that system's adherents upon the meaning it holds for their lives. As Vattimo puts it,

We must keep in mind that it is the dissolution of metaphysics that frees us for pietas... Once we discover that all the systems of values are nothing but human, all too human productions, what is left for us to do? Do we dismiss them as lies and errors? No, we hold them even dearer because they are all we have in the world, they are the only density, thickness, richness of our experiences, they are the only "being."¹⁹

Far from being the end of a belief system, the deconstructive treatment necessary for entry into liberal society—and acceptance of its standards and pre-suppositions—can occasion a new and more authentic encounter with our chosen

¹⁸ Honig, 76-77

¹⁹ Gianni Vattimo, "Etica dell'interpretazione," (Turin, Rosenberg and Sellier, 1989) as found in Frascati-Lochhead, Marta, *Kenosis and Feminist Theology* (Albany, State University of New York Press 1998), 88

creeds. Unencumbered by the drive to conquer the world and the need to define themselves in opposition to other systems, philosophical and religious worldviews can at last be refocused on the task of facilitating individual human flourishing.

We find ourselves, at the close of our inquiry, beset by the obligatory conservative protest that asks what, after all this “rehabilitation” (we can surely imagine our hypothetical interlocutor practically spitting forth the word) is left of Rawls? In answer to this concern, we can only respond that we have sought to interrogate particularly productive tensions within Rawls’s work and to make of those tensions an avenue into a productive employment of an admittedly modified form of that work as a means of proposing a theoretical construction capable of providing a safe space for difference. The deconstructive treatment of belief that we have read into Rawls’s discussion of the fact of pluralism generates and preserves this space, even as it opens the way for the establishment of shared standards of public discourse upon which to ground effective political action. If the liberalism that we imagine is more strongly anti-essentialist and self-critical than Rawls’s own, it nonetheless maintains its liberal character both structurally and in spirit, even going so far as to recapture (without fear of imperialism) the universalizing ambition of liberalism (about which Rawls, perhaps understandably, keeps silent in his own account) in the form of the promulgation of an awareness of contingency and the consequent undermining of the sorts of totalizing belief systems productive of violence and repression. More importantly, the conception of liberalism that we have imagined maintains the voluntarism of Rawls’s own account while keeping intact liberalism’s rejection of violence. What is perhaps most striking about our

particular appropriative reading of Rawls is that, even when brought into dialogue with thinkers and areas of concern quite alien to his project, Rawls's liberalism remains capable, with relatively little modification, of productively incorporating those areas of concern. Liberalism may not be capable of the sort of neutrality that Rawls envisions for it, but it may well be capable of something just as good: a flexibility permissive of constant expansion, reinvention, and re-imagination.

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