Religion in the public sphere

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Introduction

If questions are raised regarding religion in the public sphere, one would perhaps like to know how the term ‘the public sphere’ is understood. Religion can be seen in relation to society and the public in general, and to the political in particular; these areas do not necessarily overlap. Philosopher Anthony O’Hear declares for instance that some areas should be independent of politics, while being parts of society and public life of course: art, sport and education would be three such areas. (O’Hear, 2009: 203) In this contribution, I consider ‘the public sphere’ to be a sphere of common interest, and in which there is some kind of debate or exchange going on with regard to some kind of decisions; that entails use of arguments. This could be called a ‘political sphere’. Important to notice though is that it is not limited to political institutions.

In discussions regarding the relationship between religion and the public sphere – what it is and what form it should have – there are various models for interaction between religion and politics. In focus here is something that could be called the ‘Western political Liberalism’. This focus is chosen because this brand of ‘liberalism’ holds a strong position in political theory, and in practice. One of the most well-known exponents is philosopher John Rawls, but other prominent thinkers with slightly different backgrounds, such as Jürgen Habermas and Paul Ricoeur, could be mentioned. Rawls argues that religion should be kept away from the public sphere. His position can of course be elaborated and analysed in various ways. One crucial part of Rawls’s argument appears to be that religious traditions have a character that makes them unsuitable for the public sphere. On this particular point, Rawls has a vision of religious traditions that is shared by others. There are affinities between Rawls and the anthropologist Clifford Geertz for instance. In this article, there is someone else in the forefront together with Rawls, namely George A. Lindbeck. It is particularly interesting to deal with Lindbeck, as he is a theologian who develops a theory of religion, which corresponds with Rawls’s vision. The aim of this contribution is however to show that Rawls, and Lindbeck, must be questioned in various fashions. This questioning makes possible an alternative perspective regarding the place of religion in the public sphere. Such alternative perspective would include arguments that religion cannot be excluded from the public sphere; it is good if the spectrum of different worldviews comes to the surface in public deliberations, and that this is good for society as new areas are brought into or out from the public sphere.
Models of interaction

There are different models for how to relate religion to politics. One of them would be a neat separation between religion and politics on theological grounds (Benne, 2010). It seems easy to think of, for instance, the Amish or Jehovah’s Witnesses not wishing to take part in politics or in other mundane activities outside their respective communities. Perhaps this separation on theological grounds could be seen in the light of political theories, at least since Machiavelli, stressing the practical and concrete goal of politics, viz. to seize power and keep it in order to rule; in politics there is no place for idealistic thoughts about what should be obtained in a good society, as it were (Machiavelli, 1976, in particular sections VIII, XV, XII, and XVIII). As scholar of religion Ivan Strenski puts it: ‘Attempting to govern the state by the Christian ethics appropriate to the individual would only bring ruin to the realm’ (Strenski, 2010: 126). There would be a discrepancy between Christian ethics and what is required for political success. Following this line of thought, politics is about dominating over others, and about using others as instruments; hence there would be a direct opposition between Judeo-Christian ethics and politics (ibid.: 127). However interesting and stimulating the model of separation between religion and politics on theological grounds may be, it seems more interesting to analyse various ideas regarding to what extent, where and how religion should or could be permitted in the public sphere, a fortiori in politics. Four models, or perhaps rather four patterns of argument of this type, are easily identified. But first some words on a non-model, in which there is no distinction at all between religion and politics; in a theocracy there is no or only a very limited field for what is normally called ‘political life’. In a theocracy the idea is that the State is to be led directly by God, or indirectly by human beings who are divinely guided. Hence it is obsolete to speak of ‘religion in the public sphere’. What does constitute a thought pattern with regard to religion in the public sphere however is a model in which religious bodies or religious communities actively and consciously seek to influence political decisions and the public debate by openly taking part in the public discussions and publically argue with reference to a particular religious position (Benne, 2010). This model stands in clear opposition to the next three models, which are slightly different regarding the argument. Nonetheless all agree on this point: keep religion out of the public sphere.

The first counter-model is based on the idea that all religion is bad and dangerous as all religion fundamentally distorts human minds. If that is the case, religion cannot have any place in public life or in politics (ibid.). It is a rather strong claim to say that all religion fundamentally distorts human life. An alternative version is then to claim that religious convictions employed in the public sphere automatically leads to theocracy, which is of course seen as both dangerous and unhealthy (ibid.). Whatever version is endorsed, the consequences are the same: religion cannot be permitted in politics.

Now, a second model of this kind could be identified. Religion should have nothing to do with politics just because a number of specific religious claims are unreasonable, and against established science, against contemporary norms or alike (ibid.). It could be ‘conservative values’ regarding family life, sexuality and abortion; it could be about arguments for ‘intelligent design’ or against evolution theory. It goes without saying that some religious claims of this type are odd compared to mainstream opinion. Still, why should all religion be excluded just because some religious people hold some odd positions? Or why should everything within a particular tradition be excluded because of some particular oddities? Furthermore, what is normal, mainstream, or reasonable after all?

The third model or pattern is the one I find the most interesting to discuss because it is a cornerstone in liberal political theory. According to this model, religious arguments should be banned from the public sphere for the following reason: in political life – in public deliberations,
in the public sphere – arguments should be used that are formulated and understandable by public reason, i.e. by some reason shared by everyone; religious arguments are per se formulated with reference to reasons not understandable by everyone and must therefore be excluded from the public sphere (Benne, 2010). According to this model, it is of course no crime to be religious; everyone is entitled to have religious or ideological convictions. Furthermore, a society would have to accept that different religious groups try to influence politics in various ways (ibid.). Nonetheless, religion influencing politics would be acceptable only as long as no specific religious arguments are brought forward. Religious doctrine and ideological conviction with their respective arguments may well play a role, but only in so far they are translated into arguments understood by ‘public reason’. John Rawls will be taken as the prime example of this model.

Western liberal theories on religion and the public sphere

John Rawls offers an extensive argument pro what he calls ‘political liberalism’. The aim of ‘political liberalism’ is to provide a neutral framework theory about how society should be organised. Rawls argues that a democratic society should be constructed around a political understanding of justice. Such conception would be freestanding from any specific metaphysical or epistemological doctrine beyond what lies in the political conception itself. There are of course other values that both apply to other fields of life – the personal, the familial, and the associational to take a few examples – and that have a relation to political values. One of Rawls’s central ideas is however that the political domain and its conception of justice are not dependent on any particular metaphysical, philosophical, ethical, religious or ideological ground. The political conception of justice, as a fundamental idea regarding the political life, its procedures and fundamental values, does not need to have any deep ethical, philosophical or religious motivation. These ideas about political life can be motivated by religious arguments or by a particular philosophical understanding, but they need not be and therefore it is appropriate to speak about ‘overlapping consensus’ (Rawls, 2005: 10–11, 134). Moreover, such political consensus is simply reasonable; in other words, no extra convictions, nothing more and nothing else than common reason are required in order to agree upon these basic structures. The only consensus that can be sought, and that is indeed necessary, is a consensus constituting a framework for the debate, for the societal deliberations and political decisions (ibid.; see also Ricœur, 1986, 1995).

Rawls’s positive description of a liberal, democratic society – with theoretical support in political liberalism – is contrasted with a negative alternative. For instance, in classical Greek philosophy and in the Christian tradition respectively, it was held that one particular metaphysical or religious conception could be the true and correct basis for a society. Rawls contests that idea; questions related to ‘the good society’ should be kept away from the common debate (Rawls, 2005). Only political notions – such as justice is held to be – are required. Hence only political arguments should have their place in the public deliberations.

Why is Rawls so adamant in his resistance to seek a philosophical, religious or even ethical basis for a society? The answer is rather simple. If anything else is accepted than the most basic and simple commitment to a political understanding of a fair and just structure for how the political life should be organised, the sluices are opened and it would require adhering to what Rawls calls a comprehensive doctrine (ibid.: 134). According to Rawls, a doctrine is fully comprehensive ‘when it covers all recognized values and virtues within one rather precisely articulated scheme of thought. . .’ (ibid.: 175).

It would be disastrous for a society if it were based on such a comprehensive doctrine. Going beyond political arguments and relying on arguments regarding what is good would force people
to embrace a particular worldview, or to accept an unbridgeable communication gap between different communities each of them adhering to a particular comprehensive doctrine.

As Rawls contrasts his ‘overlapping consensus’ based on common reason with a religiously motivated position for instance, there must be some significant difference between them. Each citizen should be guaranteed the right to hold certain convictions; no one is expected to put her/his doctrine in danger. For that very reason, Rawls finds it important to separate religious convictions from politics. It appears that Rawls sees in the ‘comprehensive doctrines’ an unreasonable desire or strive to use public political power in forcing others to have a particular opinion, and to shape life in a particular way. Rawls deems it therefore necessary to stress that people must all for ever give up hope of changing the constitution so to establish their religion’s hegemony (Rawls, 2001). It is in this very context that Rawls argues pro a liberal society as a society in which no-one has to share any deep religious, ideological or ethical values. An important aspect is that in a liberal society, the State does not have any project, according to Rawls. There is no intention to foster individual citizens. The sole overarching goals for education for example would simply be to enable citizens to cooperate within the societal framework, and to be self-supporting (Rawls, 2005).

A backbone in Rawls’s argument is that the exercise of political power obtains authority or legitimacy only to the extent that it follows some basic principles that all citizens should be reasonably expected to endorse, as they are seen as rational and reasonable. Corollary, citizens should be able to give an account for how principles and policies they advocate can be supported by public reason. At the heart of his reasoning is the idea that it should be possible for anybody to explain his/her choice on the grounds of values recognisable by public reason (Rawls, 2005). Consequently, Rawls maintains that religious or ideological arguments must be kept away from the public debate, as they are necessarily comprehensive doctrines, hence not commonly accessible. A crucial aspect of Rawls’s argument is thus his understanding of what he calls ‘comprehensive doctrine’ and the role this kind of doctrine plays in religion. Rawls’ conception of religious doctrines as comprehensive in this particular way rimes with the idea that George A. Lindbeck (2009) as a theologian, and many others, have regarding religious doctrines.

**Conception of ‘comprehensive doctrines’**

My argument in this contribution is that Rawls’s idea of religious traditions – even if supported by theologians, religious leaders and some theorists – can and must be questioned. Let me first give an account of this view of religious traditions through a reading of George Lindbeck. Although Lindbeck considers religions ‘reasonable’, contrary to Rawls, he also emphasises several aspects recognisable from Rawls’s conception of religion, in particular the character of ‘comprehensive doctrine’ forming a system covering all values and virtues and being severed from other comprehensive doctrines; each tradition making total claims and being incomprehensible and untranslatable to other traditions. Hence, according to Lindbeck there would so be a competition between incommensurable worldviews without any common ground – at least in a strong sense – that could be used as a common platform, very much in the same way as Rawls describes ‘comprehensive doctrines’. Each religious tradition or comprehensive doctrine would thus function as a distinctive idiom related to a particular ‘form of life’, Lindbeck (2009) claims.

Lindbeck’s grounding idea is that a religious tradition provides a framework of interpretation. Believers try to understand reality and live their lives from within this framework (Lindbeck, 2009). To be religious is taking part in a cultural and linguistic frame that decides and shapes life in its totality, Lindbeck claims according to theologian Pierre Gisel (Gisel, 2004). Each tradition is distinct, and incommensurable, having its own language. In an attempt to find illuminating
comparisons, Lindbeck reports how a linguist may test grammatical formulations. The question is ‘whether their ordinary-language consequences are acceptable or unacceptable to competent speakers of the language being investigated’ (Lindbeck, 2009: 85). The same would hold for religions; the truth or reasonableness of a given religious utterance must be decided from within the language-religion, i.e. competent religion-users must be consulted. Noticeable is how Lindbeck here draws on a linguistic method of evaluation that is founded on the conception that a particular language-use is not, cannot be, evaluated by a common, public reason available to all of us.

John Rawls sees a problem with religion in the public sphere exactly as religions function, according to him, as ‘comprehensive doctrines’. They are not open to any common discussion or to any common argument. Lindbeck seems to underwrite this understanding when stressing the analogy between his understanding of language and culture on the one hand and religion on the other hand. Lindbeck speaks about a religion as being an external structure that ‘shapes the self and its world’ (Lindbeck, 2009: 20). One part of Lindbeck’s analogy between language and culture on the one hand, and religion on the other, is the thorough impact they have on our lives; we see through these lenses and they form our perception in a strong way (Emery, 2004; Gisel, 2004).

Conceptions of ‘tradition’ questioned back

Several different, and yet interrelated, questions can be asked. One of them is whether there really is such a unity of a given (religious) tradition that Lindbeck seems to presuppose. According to Lindbeck, a religion is like a cultural frame that precisely frames the totality of our lives and our thoughts. Hence, it is rather the ‘religious text’ that determines the vision of the world, than the opposite (Lindbeck, 2009, p. 104). This is a strong framework; even those who have lost their active and conscious contact with their religious roots are coloured by them. Lindbeck continues by saying that ‘religions . . . are like dwelling places one cannot entirely leave without changing one’s identity’ (ibid.: 136; see also Morerod, 2004: 166–7). A second question is whether religious traditions really play such an important and decisive role in people’s life. Lindbeck claims that religions are interpretation schemes with universal and exhaustive scope; they are concentrated upon what is considered more important than anything else, they aim at organising life in its totality (Lindbeck, 2004; Emery, 2004; Gisel, 2004). Yet, most people do probably rather mix traditions and they probably move between them. (For studies of concrete examples, see for instance Hornborg, 2009, and van Bragt, 2002). In the following, I will concentrate upon the two issues already mentioned. First, the question of unity. Second, the question of whether belonging to a particular tradition entails having no other belongings and being totally governed by this belonging. This will, of course, have an impact on religion in the public sphere. Or, so I will argue.

Not unity

Lindbeck’s views of ‘tradition’ are problematic. A crucial part of Lindbeck’s theory of religion is the idea that religions are systems of symbols that form ‘distinct ways of experiencing and being oriented toward self, neighbor, and cosmos’ (Lindbeck, 2009: 26; for a similar perspective, see also Geertz, 1993: 90–123). Now, it may be questioned to what extent a religion is best characterised as a system of symbols, and furthermore to what extent such a system has to be a uniform and homogeneous system. Actually, Lindbeck appears to see this too. It may well be, Lindbeck

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states, that people agree on certain explicitly formulated doctrines while being in disagreement regarding how they should be read, understood, interpreted or justified. Hence, there may be consensus with regard to formulations and yet radical theological divisions (Lindbeck, 2009). Furthermore, it is possible to agree on some belief but doing that from rather different perspectives and for different reasons (Marshall, 2009: xiii–xiv; see also Fridlund, 2011: 45).

The very place attributed to one thing or another, and the weight given to one thing rather than another, also has far reaching consequences. Lindbeck argues for instance that if one part of a given religious tradition is put at the centre, rather than another, the image of what is central changes. What canon that is fixated, and how particular parts of the canon are framed, do evidently have material and doctrinal consequences (Lindbeck, 2009: 108. See also Fridlund, 2011: 46–7). If this is true, a religious tradition does not simply shape reality, it does not simply furnish with the lens through which the world is seen, and it does not absorb the world straightforwardly. Rather, a religious tradition is like a basket containing a number of elements that can be used – or not used – read, seen, understood and employed – or not. Moreover, these elements can be combined in various fashions. Religion is a diversified and complex mixture of faith, practice, relations and experiences. All these uses, readings and combinations do indeed frame and shape reality. Yet, the direction is not one-way; there is interaction. What is picked up and used, what is chosen and combined, and so forth, is always ultimately an open question.

Sociologist of religion Meredith B. McGuire (2008) emphasises that it is misleading to think of religious traditions in terms of immutable, pure, authentic or unitary traditions. All religious traditions, like cultures, are formed in processes of interpenetration, according to McGuire. Also a religious tradition is shaped by what takes place elsewhere; there is a going between, as it were (McGuire, 2008: 190). Now it must be said that Lindbeck, Rawls, Geertz and many others would certainly agree to a large extent; they would not necessarily contest the fact that a given tradition has a history and that it is shaped in a historical process. Still, they could say that in the present situation, the traditions that are at hand are there as distinct entities (Lindbeck, 2009: 26). Moreover, it has to be said that even if a tradition is considered in principle a loose entity, continuously in transformation and constantly multiple, it is also obvious that there is some identifiable core of a given religious tradition. Nonetheless, the decisive point is that it has to be admitted that what is considered the core, i.e. normal or essential, can change and can be displaced; exactly where to draw the demarcation line and exactly how to delimit various things can be negotiated. If one thing is considered ordinary and normal it may become abnormal and extraordinary, and vice versa (Fridlund, 2011: 93–5). Hence, what has to be contested is the absolute privilege of one particular reading of a particular religious tradition. That implies that variants cannot be axiomatically or definitely excluded. This variation within a particular tradition can be linked to the fact that the identity of a tradition is historical and thereby contingent. Any religious tradition results of a series of constructions answering to the conditions of every moment. It would be a mistake to think that there is any simple essence that is or can be transmitted from one time to another; each historical formulation of a tradition must be a preliminary one (ibid.: 108–9; see also O’Leary, 1996 and Thelle, 2003). A religious tradition is thus not a unity that is unambiguously uniform; it is rather the opposite. Various elements of a religious discourse can be seen pragmatically; they are used, highlighted, brought forward, underlined – or the opposite: hidden, neglected, and ignored (Fridlund, 2011: 115–17; see also Derrida, 1979 and Lévi-Strauss, 1962). McGuire (2008) argues that people struggle in their present lives and in so doing they call upon various traditions. In this very process, the traditions themselves are re-shaped, and transformed (McGuire, 2008: 192; see also Fridlund, 2011: 151).
Adherence not all-encompassing

The questioning of Rawls’ and Lindbeck’s conception of religious traditions as comprehensive doctrines and the role they play is twofold in this contribution. The first has to do with whether a particular tradition indeed is one and uniform. The second interrogation regards whether taking part in the life of a given tradition entails being totally governed by it. I claim that also the answer to the second question is negative. It would be a mistake to believe that the religious affiliation or belonging to a particular religious group is some kind of master category that would be ultimately decisive or furnish the individual with a set of definite overarching norms for his/her life (McGuire, 2008). When Lindbeck develops his theory of religion, it is not necessarily a controversial theory. It goes well with aspects in Geertz, and it strikes a cord in Rawls and Habermas, for instance. According to Lindbeck (2009), a religious tradition is a comprehensive doctrine and consequently all-encompassing. Lindbeck maintains for instance that how one feels, how one thinks, and how one acts are shaped by the tradition in which one is raised; all this takes place in conformity with the given tradition. Yet, there are strong indications that a doctrine does not strongly regulate life in this manner. The anthropologist Talal Asad (1986) shows for instance that Islamic jurisdiction shari’a as such is not decisive for social practice, and has never been – as such. Shari’a has never been important or decisive for more than a fragment of Muslim life. If one compares the impact shari’a has with the impact modern administrative and legal rules has, the latter decide much more; they are simply more persuasive and they possess much more efficient and effective means of control (Asad, 1986: 13; see also Abou el Fadl, 2003: 320–36).

Also McGuire (2008) stands in clear opposition to the view of Lindbeck, Rawls and many others; she claims that religion is a multifarious phenomenon. The crucial thing is to realise that the religious person lives his/her religion in some everyday practice where different aspects are combined. The socialisation into a particular religion may inform this practice, but a particular religion cannot determine practices or beliefs. Rather, material for this kind of situational construction comes from various sources. A particular religion may be one of them, perhaps even an important source, but it is unlikely to be the only one. McGuire shows for instance how a religious person may find the very doctrine of the ‘home community’ frankly unimportant, while he/she may at the same time borrow images, ideas and practices from other philosophical and religious traditions. Another important thing to remember is that individuals may identify themselves with various different groups simultaneously. McGuire adds that people of course are influenced by these belongings and that they are marked by the identities that follow, but the personal identity cannot be determined by them. Furthermore, McGuire argues also that not even a deeply religious person is bound to have a core identity as it were. Sometimes certain aspects of the person’s life are in the foreground, sometimes there are other aspects. Some of them would have to do with the religious affiliation, some of them not. There is perhaps a feeling of belonging, but it is not necessarily restrictive. People change, adapt and express their lived religion in a creative manner; there are different stages in life, different relations, different cultural contexts, and all of them give rise to different identificational identities.

Emergence of a new landscape

The discussion regarding religion in the public sphere in this contribution has its starting point in political liberalism as a leading political theory. A central claim in political liberalism is that what is needed in a democratic society is some political consensus. Partly this claim relies on the idea that for instance religious or ideological consensus would force citizens to a particular
worldview, and that use of religious argument would entail acceptance of ‘comprehensive doctrine’. Therefore, it has been seen as important to see whether it is correct to speak of a ‘religious tradition’ as a good example of a ‘comprehensive doctrine’ in this sense.

Vital to Rawls’s and Lindbeck’s conception of a religious tradition is that it is regulative, and also distinct from other traditions; there is no common argument and no common reason. This conception has been questioned. First, is a tradition really a uniform entity? It has been argued that a tradition contains a set of different elements that are picked up and used or neglected and ignored in various combinations, rather pragmatically. What Rawls calls a comprehensive doctrine is always multiple. Second, what is the importance of a tradition? The argument is that the adherence is not all-encompassing in two senses: it is not everything and it is not regulating all.

**An alternative perspective**

Lindbeck’s analyses give ground for reflections in two different directions. On the one hand, a tradition is perceived as a strong framework, indeed shaping the vision of reality. So far, this side has been emphasised underpinning Rawls’s political liberalism with regard to religion. On the other hand, Lindbeck could also be read as arguing that a tradition should be seen as just a framework, i.e. not concerned with specific content. Seen from this angle, a religious tradition is first and foremost like a filter, or like a structure furnishing a grammar. At the centre are not particular affirmations. In that case, a religion is rather concerned with how various utterances can be meaningful (Lindbeck, 2009: 67).

Now, if framing in the sense of ‘structure’ or ‘grammar’ is central to a tradition, also liberalism, and democracy for instance, must be seen as traditions in this sense – i.e. a framework not judging particular content (one could recall Rawls’s insistence on consensus regarding ‘the formal structure,’ i.e. the principle of justice). If traditions are about framing, one consequence appears to follow immediately, namely that it is a bit peculiar to claim traditions in general to be all-encompassing. That goes for all kinds of traditions; as little as ‘liberalism’ is a ‘comprehensive doctrine’, Christianity or Islam is. There is however also another possible conclusion going in the opposite direction; whether a tradition is religious, cultural, linguistic, political, philosophical, or ideological, a tradition is a tradition, which means that to the extent that religion is all-governing, a strong framework shaping the vision of reality, for instance liberalism is too. Even though Rawls argues for instance that there cannot be any particular idea of ‘good life’ that should motivate the choice of ‘justice’, there are some values lurking in the background. Also to political liberalism there seems to be something good – something worth striving for – namely order, security and stability. In this sense, liberal theory is not neutral but an expression of certain values, political theorist François Huguenin (2009) says. Furthermore, the liberal doctrine excludes every other possibility, on this very point; there is no room for alternative meta-theories. In a sense, political liberalism is therefore all-governing. Philosopher of religion Nicholas Wolterstorff (1997) points out that:

The liberal is not willing to live with a politics of multiple communities. He is trying to discover, and to form, the relevant community. He thinks we need a shared political basis; he is trying to discover and nourish that basis.

*Wolterstorff, 1997: 109*

So, when philosopher Jürgen Habermas claims that traditional religious communities face a dissonance, the same could be said of Liberals; also Liberals – if I may allow myself to borrow a statement from Habermas – ‘must develop an epistemic attitude toward other worldviews
that they encounter within a universe of discourse hitherto occupied only by their own’ (Habermas, 2006: 14). This said, I propose returning to arguments regarding religion as a problem in the public sphere.

When analysing Rawls, some traits of his discourse appear relevant to the present discussion. First, it is obvious that he holds ‘comprehensive doctrines’ to be exclusivist; a ‘comprehensive doctrine’ covers all, which gives little space for other and different conceptions with regard to particular issues. Second, it is also evident that Rawls does not consider political liberalism a ‘comprehensive doctrine’. Now, Rawls does not wish to ban every religious tradition, philosophical conviction or ideological standpoint. What is at stake in Rawls’s teachings is whether such ‘exclusivist comprehensive doctrines’ should be accepted or not in political life. It seems that one thing that Rawls is afraid of if comprehensive doctrines are allowed to play a role in the public sphere and in politics is the intolerance that he believes would follow. This is not very surprising. Following Lindbeck (2009), what Rawls calls ‘comprehensive doctrines’ are not and cannot be evaluated, against any common reason; if two religious traditions are put side by side, they can be compared regarding which of them that has the capacity to assimilate other religious ideas – or concerns – that is which of them that has the capacity to take care of the strong points in other traditions, without losing its proper identity or without dissolving, i.e. without ceasing to exist. In that sense, they are exclusivist. ‘Comprehensive doctrines’ in general, whether they are religious, philosophical, or ideological does not matter, do live their lives on their own, and their respective discourses are inaccessible to common reason. Yet, in this figure of thought there is something particular with religion. Robert Audi, for instance, claims that a religious view is much stronger and more ‘comprehensive’ than other types of comprehensive views (Audi, 1997: 7–8). Against this background, it seems understandable wanting to exclude religion from politics. Now, one could argue that a ‘comprehensive doctrine’ does not have to be intolerant as Rawls fears, and it does not have to be excessive in its claims (Huguenin, 2009).

Of course, one way of arguing is to claim that tolerance/intolerance is a psychological issue or a question of behaviour; being a religious (or ideological) exclusivist would not per se entail disrespect or intolerance (see e.g. Basinger, 2002; Netland, 1991). Nonetheless, as little as the teachings should be overestimated, they should not be neglected. Theoretical attitudes and positions are not innocent. They reflect and they nourish concrete comportment. (Fridlund, 2011: 4–5; 2008). Still, it is crucial to see the multifarious character of a tradition. On the one hand, a tradition, even when it does not have the ambition to be a comprehensive doctrine, is not – and cannot be – neutral, which means that it has a particular standpoint that excludes other standpoints (Huguenin, 2009). On the other hand, as one reading of Lindbeck has shown, expressing values and not being neutral must not imply being concerned with particular contents. Scholar of religion Jeffrey Stout (2004) claims for instance that also a liberal society, and a democracy can be seen as traditions constituting frameworks. That would be tradition in the sense of being a habit of reasoning; the core issues would be about attitudes, concerns, dispositions, patterns of behaviour and alike; such tradition is not necessarily construed upon any central notion and a common definition of this notion. I would say the same goes for tradition in general. Such habits of reasoning, and patterns of behaviour are indeed important. They are at the same time vague, open and fluid, permitting a variety of readings. So, of course a given tradition is perhaps both tolerant and intolerant. A good example could be the Western democracy tradition. At least ideally, it allows everybody to be heard. It is also so, however, that certain standpoints may not be expressed.

Now, if Rawls in his shaping of a political theory is very much concerned with questions regarding what type of arguments that could be used in public deliberations, one could say that
Stout widens the perspective. One could say that Stout attempts to give a rather more substantial account of what democracy is like. Stout claims that one way of characterising democracy is to say that it is a play in which everyone has the right to take part. The requirement is that the one who is supposed to take part must be prepared to give reasons and to ask for reasons (Stout, 2004). It should be noted, however, that no common standard is required. Stout claims that even though the common debate is not grounded on any particular theological perspective, each and everyone who takes part in the discussion may have one. They cannot presume that their particular perspective be shared by all others however. Yet, the implication is not that everyone obliges herself/himself to follow any ‘secular reason’. The only thing that is of any interest is that each one taking part in the deliberations must be aware of what can be presumed in a discussion with people who may have other theological and interpretative dispositions (Stout, 2004). Crucial is that everyone must see what commitments other people have and still judge them by the means and from the point of view one has. With philosopher John Finnis (2011) one could ask why we should accept the idea that such exchange should not be possible. In fact, the question could be reversed. If a religious tradition is multiform, and typically not all-encompassing, would religious people not be inclined to share arguments both from within their main tradition and in interaction with other currents? Eventually, when studying the question of religion in the public sphere from this side it becomes necessary to understand not only democracy but also what discussions and exchanges look like in a democracy.

The very goal of deliberation, debate and discussion in a democracy is not, cannot be, that each of us simply exposes his/her view on various topics, Wolterstorff (2004) claims. The debate is a step towards an agreement and a decision. Hence, what is going on is that we listen to others and we try to persuade others. In this process, there is nothing that indicates that we first must agree upon what arguments are acceptable and what arguments are not. This does not preclude that each of us may have strong and clear views regarding what are acceptable etc. One implication of this approach is that it is absolutely possible to be ‘liberal’ and a ‘democrat’, and convinced about a number of ‘liberal values’, strive for them and so on, and simultaneously realise that such convictions are a belief, according to Stout (2004). In other words, one can very well be ‘relativist’ on a meta-level, and being a militant activist with political convictions on another level. The only point when they come into conflict is when one believes one’s convictions to be absolute, Neil Levy (2002) says. In fact, it could be argued that it is exactly the uncertainty about the argument that motivates the debate (Fridlund, 2011: 147–50). The very fact that convictions must be just preliminary convictions can be seen as the ground for political life. If political convictions are not given and if they are formed through deliberations in the undecidable, political arguments are then necessary; commitments by human agents are necessary. Philosopher and political theorist Seyla Benhabib (1992) says that most probably there is not one way of living that is prima facie superior to all other modes. That does not impede that one can, or perhaps even must, give reasons to the mode one prefers. Furthermore, from that particular perspective, one may ask other people to be precise and explain why they find their way being better than other, alternative, ways.

In this context, Wolterstorff (2004) stresses the pragmatic side of argumentation. The very objective when arguing politically, i.e. in the public sphere, is to convince others; I want to persuade my interlocutor that my suggestions are preferable to other suggestions. Consequently, Wolterstorff declares, I will adapt my arguments to the situation and to the person with whom I am talking at the moment. That means that the reasons I bring forward and the arguments I rely on in one discussion do not have to be the same as in another discussion. On the contrary, it is rather unlikely that I use the same arguments and seek the same reasons. The reasons I rely on in my argument do not even have to be reasons I believe in, accept or even less reasons I...
find decisive for my own decision – the goal is to convince the other. Therefore, our listening and our persuasion efforts are different in different contexts, Wolterstorff argues (Wolterstorff, 2004: 107–8. Cf. John Finnis expressing an opposite view [Finnis, 2011: 106]). If this is correct, by and large, it has some immediate consequences for how ‘religious people’ can be expected to behave. Stout, for instance, declares that a widely spread understanding of belief would be that the one claiming to believe says: don’t ask for arguments or reasons because I do not have any. This appears to be a misconception of how ‘believers’ behave, Stout maintains; many are indeed prepared to argue for their religious claims (Stout, 2004: 87). That would be less of a surprise if one acknowledges the preliminary, historical and contingent character of religious dogma (although one can of course concurrently conceive of, for instance, God and religious experience as absolute).

A first conclusion can be made here. A religious tradition is not typically a frozen uniform entity; it is rather magma, a fluid material that can go in different directions. Also, a religious tradition is typically not all-encompassing. Consequently, religious people would typically be expected to argue – sometimes purely religiously and sometimes not. Hence, in public exchanges, it would be bizarre obliging people to employ ‘public reason’. What is required is rather that those who take part listen to other people, and that they make decisions regarding how they should be understood. Out of this, at least three arguments can be distilled regarding religion in the public sphere.

1 Religion, and other ‘comprehensive doctrines’ cannot be excluded from the public sphere.
2 It is desirable to put ‘deep motivations’ (religious, philosophical, ideological, ethical . . .) on the table from time to time.
3 It is sometimes good, and necessary, to rely on religious and ideological arguments in the public debate.

1 ‘Comprehensive doctrines’ cannot be excluded from the public sphere

When ‘comprehensive doctrines’ are supposed to be excluded from the public deliberations, one idea is that what is needed is some formal frame, some consensus regarding procedures; what is not needed is ethical foundation or substantial commitments. One problematic part of this is that procedures always tend to involve precisely some substantial ethical commitments; there must be some ethos giving support to the procedure that is chosen, according to political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2006). Although it is true, Mouffe continues, that a liberal, democratic state must be agnostic in some sense, it cannot be agnostic when it comes to political values. There is something that is valuable and that has to be protected, also in Rawls’s (2005) reasoning, also beyond the implicit values identified above (stability, order, security):

to mention a restriction with a quite different ground, spouses cannot be required to testify against one another, this is to protect the great good of family life and to show public respect for the value of bonds of affection.

Rawls, 2005: 218

This eagerness to protect the value of family life has, frankly speaking, little to do with the political concept ‘justice’, it goes simply beyond ‘political reason’. This confirms the view that liberal theory is not neutral but an expression of values; there seems to be something good – something worth striving for (Huguenin, 2009). Furthermore, Rawls’s theory of justice turns
on an idea that everyone – all rational beings – would chose justice. This reasoning is however grounded on a particular psychological understanding of the human being; the human being would be driven by fear, Huguenin points out. This is however not a neutral anthropology. The human being could be driven by greed, or compassion, or love, for instance (Huguenin, 2009). Consequently, it is good and coherent to see the political as a field where various interpretations and different principles are brought forward. Also the variation regarding what is seen as the common good. What the common good is and how it should be achieved constitute a contested field. Social democrats, neoliberals and conservatives do not agree. Such fundamental disagreement also about fundamental principles is nothing to shun; it is the very presupposition for living democracy, Mouffe claims. There is no way, according to Mouffe (2006), that all views can be harmonised by a rational agreement.

2 It is desirable to put ‘deep motivations’ on the table from time to time

In Mouffe’s (2006) thinking, the separation between State and Church, which is a component of a pluralistic democracy, does not require that religion be relegated to the private sphere, nor that religion be banned from the public arena; separation State-Church does not equal separation religion-politics. Mouffe argues that what is at stake is the separation between religion and the power of the state; the state must have the monopoly of legitimate violence; no religious institutions or structures should be acknowledged coercive power. Once this has been stated, it is possible to maintain that the energy, which lies in various ideological discourses (ethical, ideological, philosophical, religious) should not be put under the bushel. The energy coming from hearing different arguments also regarding structures and frameworks should be utilised in the public deliberations. Mouffe suggests that the task of democracy cannot be to eliminate passions or simply relegate them to the private sphere; on the contrary, such passions must be mobilised in construing democracy. On this point, Jürgen Habermas (2006) makes a similar analysis when claiming that to a religious person her/his religion is not anything separate from social and political life, it is not something other. Religion is rather something that nurtures that person in her daily life, it is an energiser.

3 ‘Comprehensive doctrines’ are sometimes good

The third argument is perhaps best seen as an extension of the second one. If religion is not excluded from the public sphere as long as religious institutions do not infringe on the State’s monopoly of coercive power, it is also possible to acknowledge the role of deep motivations beyond being energisers. In the public sphere, issues hitherto neglected must sometimes be brought up, and the debate must sometimes take a new turn (Benhabib, 1992). Benhabib shows how a shift with regard to what is acceptable in the public debate sometimes is good. When issues regarding the health of the employees could not be discussed because the work conditions were regarded ‘trade secret’, that was at the detriment of the employees. A shift on this point has taken place, which is good (ibid.: 100). The main cause was structural but the consequences were very concrete and specific. When such concerns are taken to the political sphere, it is not an issue of procedure, not simply a question within the framework of a political consensus. Here, opposing views regarding what should count as political or not meet in an open debate. Ultimately, there are certain metaphysical, philosophical, ethical, ideological or religious convictions that push the entire debate in new directions. Similar issues would be issues of child abuse and domestic violence. It could so be, philosopher Luce Irigaray (2000) says, that in a
liberal democracy strictly speaking a *carte blanche* could be given to the State *not* to bother about what happens behind the doors closed to family life, for instance. In several ways it is good and necessary to protect the private from the State. Yet, such protection may also serve those who want status quo regarding relations between parents and children, between men and women. It cannot be denied that decisions on where to draw the line are rooted in values supported by ethical, ideological, philosophical and religious arguments.

**Conclusion**

At the heart of this chapter about religion in the public sphere is a discussion regarding John Rawls’ version of political liberalism. Rawls argues that religious arguments should not have any place in political deliberations. The reason: religions, as ‘comprehensive doctrines’ are all-encompassing entities, uniform blocks, distinct and separate and utterly deciding how their respective followers should think, believe and act. Consequently, the use of religious arguments would equal aiming at seizing the political power in order to force all citizens to embrace a particular worldview and live their lives in accordance with specific ethical guidelines. Therefore, religious arguments are not suitable in the public deliberations, according to Rawls. This conception of religion is underscored by Lindbeck’s theory of doctrine. This conception has been interrogated in two respects. First, one would have to ask whether a religious tradition really is a fixed unity, stable, and indeed separate from other traditions. It has been argued that a tradition is rather floating, that various traditions are interpenetrating, and that a religious tradition typically does not form one single, coherent system. Second, there are strong indications that a tradition is *not* governing people’s lives: in real and concrete life there would always be a mix, a take and give from various sources when people try to find a pattern for their lives, and a tradition has never such a strong grip as is sometimes thought.

Tackling the question from another angle, it is also possible to claim a tradition to be precisely a framework. In other words, it is not necessarily all-encompassing, not necessarily governing all; in a framework approach, religious traditions would to some extent govern perspectives, attitudes and concerns, not the particular content. Furthermore, it could be argued that religion in this sense is not anything particular (for instance ideologies, and philosophical currents – including political liberalism – are similar). In opposition to Rawls it has been argued both that a comprehensive doctrine is *not* necessarily exclusivist, and that ‘political liberalism’ is as much a comprehensive doctrine, as any other ideology or any philosophical pattern. If these elements are taken into consideration, one would have to conclude that a ‘religious person’ is much more ‘flexible’ in the debate than Rawls’s political liberalism presupposes.

If these analyses are correct, they could give ground for an alternative approach to religion in the public sphere. One way of describing this alternative would be to say that although the democratic public debate cannot be based upon any particular theological perspective, it is quite natural to have many perspectives in the air. A first consequence would be that each of us would have to take on responsibility and declare our respective positions, while at the same time be prepared to listen to various views. A second consequence would be that each of us would try to persuade others while accepting the preliminary character of all arguments; in so doing, it is always a question of pragmatic arguments, *not* arguments referring to public reason, common standard etc.

In brief, I claim that what Rawls calls ‘comprehensive doctrines’ (such as religion) cannot be excluded from the public debate – there are always some substantial commitments of this character. Furthermore, it is fruitful to let different views (religions) meet in public; sometimes only references to deep motivations, ideologies, religions and comprehensive doctrines may...
change deep perspectives; sometimes this is the only way to see that things hitherto overlooked should be dealt with politically.

Finally, it seems to me that generally speaking liberal democracy should be open to this kind of debate if not becoming dogmatic, authoritarian, or totalitarian. Even so more if it is likely that people are not stubbornly tied up to one single, unified model even if they may refer to some particular religious tradition or take some particular ideological stand. As people in reality are mixing and moving, they are in principle prepared to argue even if arguments are not simply formed according to ‘public reason’. The fact that many of us have difficulties listening to arguments brought forward by people who take a different stand, or that many of us cling on to some prejudices, is a different matter entirely. Introducing a rule that all public deliberations should be argued with ‘public reason’ does not change that.

References


