



October 2023

The Role of Religious Reasons in a Liberal Democracy

Malcolm Morano
info@ubiquitypress.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/ijurca>

Recommended Citation

Morano, Malcolm (2023) "The Role of Religious Reasons in a Liberal Democracy," *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*: Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 14.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7710/2155-4838.1107>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/ijurca/vol6/iss2/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@CWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@CWU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@cwu.edu.

The Role of Religious Reasons in a Liberal Democracy

Abstract

There is a long tradition of political thought that takes the use of religious reasons for supporting public policy to be a violation of one's duties as a citizen. I refer to this as the 'liberal position.' But is this line of thought correct? In this paper, I examine three philosophers' views on the matter, before staking out my own. First, I examine the position of John Rawls, the most influential contemporary heir of the liberal tradition. Then, I look towards Nicholas Wolterstorff for his charges against Rawls and this tradition, as well as his own view of the duties of citizens. Thirdly, I use Richard Rorty to examine how an antifoundationalist (like Wolterstorff) might respond to Wolterstorff in defense of the liberal position. Finally, I offer my own position, which uses the virtue of agreeableness to strike a balance between Wolterstorff and Rorty. The thrust of my argument is that this debate should transfer from one concerned with "religious" versus "secular" reasons to one concerned with fundamentalist versus pragmatist attitudes.

The Role of Religious Reasons in a Liberal Democracy

Malcolm Morano
Fordham University

Published online: 4 June 2014
© Malcolm Morano 2014

Abstract

There is a long tradition of political thought that takes the use of religious reasons for supporting public policy to be a violation of one's duties as a citizen. I refer to this as the 'liberal position.' But is this line of thought correct? In this paper, I examine three philosophers' views on the matter, before staking out my own. First, I examine the position of John Rawls, the most influential contemporary heir of the liberal tradition. Then, I look towards Nicholas Wolterstorff for his charges against Rawls and this tradition, as well as his own view of the duties of citizens. Thirdly, I use Richard Rorty to examine how an antifoundationalist (like Wolterstorff) might respond to Wolterstorff in defense of the liberal position. Finally, I offer my own position, which uses the virtue of agreeableness to strike a balance between Wolterstorff and Rorty. The thrust of my argument is that this debate should transfer from one concerned with "religious" versus "secular" reasons to one concerned with fundamentalist versus pragmatist attitudes.

There is a long tradition of political thought which takes the use of religious reasons for supporting public policy to be a violation of one's duties as a citizen. I will refer to this as the 'liberal position.'¹ But is this line of thought correct? In this paper, I will examine three philosophers' views on the matter, before staking out my own. First, I will examine the position of John Rawls, the most influential contemporary heir of the liberal tradition. Then, I will look towards Nicholas Wolterstorff for his charges against Rawls and this tradition, as well as his own view of the duties of citizens. Thirdly, I will use Richard Rorty to examine how an antifoundationalist (like Wolterstorff) might respond to Wolterstorff in defense of the liberal position. Finally, I

¹ It should be noted straightaway that the 'liberal position' can be a misleading term. All three of the authors I will be examining are ardent supporters of liberal democracy. What I mean by the 'liberal position' is just what I said at the outset: the view that the use of religious reasons (and reasons derived from one's comprehensive philosophical perspective) to support policy decisions violates one's duties as a citizen.

will offer my own position, which uses the virtue of agreeableness to strike a balance between Wolterstorff and Rorty.

John Rawls: The Liberal Position as Overlapping Consensus and Public Reason

We live in a world of reasonable pluralism. By this I mean that many people hold conflicting and incommensurable comprehensive perspectives, and are justified in doing so. People have different religions and views of the ultimate good, not all of which can be true. And yet, these people are perfectly reasonable in holding these positions. But given this reasonable pluralism, how are we to achieve social unity? That is, how can we come together and agree upon a fair system of cooperation, rules of engagement which are to be recognized as fair and equal across all of these comprehensive perspectives? This is the problem by which Rawls is motivated.

Rawls tries to secure social unity in a world of reasonable pluralism with the idea of overlapping consensus. Overlapping consensus is based on the idea that a *political* conception of justice can be agreed to by persons who hold a range of reasonable comprehensive perspectives. If each person is able to agree to the political conception of justice from his or her own comprehensive perspective, social unity will be secured.

Rawls wants to distinguish political conceptions of justice from conceptions based on comprehensive perspectives. He thinks that “no comprehensive doctrine is appropriate as a political conception” (PL 135) for the simple reason that “a reasonable comprehensive doctrine cannot secure the basis of social unity” (PL 134). Since no comprehensive doctrine (religious or philosophical) can achieve overlapping consensus, Rawls thinks that we must, instead, collect “such settled convictions as the belief in religious toleration and the rejection of slavery” and then “try to organize the basic intuitive ideas and principles implicit in these convictions into a coherent conception of justice” (JF 225-6). Basically, Rawls’ idea is that we ought to take convictions shared throughout the society’s political culture and create a conception of justice which is based upon the underlying ideas of those convictions. For instance, Rawls takes the convictions of religious toleration and the rejection of slavery to express the underlying idea that, in America, we consider factors such as one’s race and one’s religion to be arbitrary from a moral point of view. He then builds up his conception of justice, justice as fairness, off of the idea that these, and other consistent factors such as one’s socioeconomic status, are irrelevant to one’s interests when looking for principles of justice which can be “agreed to in an initial situation that is fair” (TJ 11). Stepping back from justice as fairness, Rawls’ point is that only *political* conceptions of justice - ones which are organized out of the shared political convictions of the culture - are capable of achieving overlapping consensus.

Rawls thinks there is one other thing which can be agreed to through overlapping consensus: public reason. Public reason is a framework which persons in a liberal

democracy agree to structure their arguments within to engage in public debate. Rawls thinks that public reason is needed because of the nature of political power in liberal democracies. For Rawls, “political power, which is always coercive power, is the power of the public, that is, of free and equal citizens as a collective body” (PL 216). Citizens are, by voting, exerting some sort of coercion onto their fellow citizens. Therefore, if a citizen bases her public policy decisions solely upon her comprehensive doctrine, she will be exerting an unjust form of coercion upon her fellow citizens. For the policy she wishes to apply to everyone is decided based upon reasons that she knows not everyone else can accept. Therefore, Rawls claims that:

“our exercise of political power is proper and hence justifiable only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to them as reasonable and rational...the ideal of citizenship imposes a moral, not a legal, duty - the duty of civility - to be able to explain to one another...how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason” (PL 217).

Note here that Rawls’ conception of public reason is quite scarce. Really, it is just the idea that we ought to be able to justify our policy decisions on grounds which all members of a pluralistic society can, in principle, accept. This certainly excludes religious and deeply philosophical grounds. But it does not do much else. Later, Rawls says that public reason really just means “that each of us must have, and be ready to explain, a criterion of what principles and guidelines we think other citizens...may reasonably be expected to endorse along with us” (PL 226). Thus, Rawls thinks that public reason requires us to frame our policy decisions around some criterion which can be proposed to other citizens as reasonable for them to endorse as well, despite their different comprehensive perspectives. To base a policy decision on one’s comprehensive perspective, e.g. one’s religion, is a violation of one’s moral duties as a citizen. Hence, Rawls’ notion of public reason commits him to the liberal position.

Nicholas Wolterstorff: The Liberal Position as Illiberal and the Consocial Alternative

Nicholas Wolterstorff offers what I consider to be a devastating critique of Rawls. This is the critique that Rawls is actually sneaking in remnants of Enlightenment epistemology. Wolterstorff points out that Rawls’ position depends upon his claim that principles proposed in conformity with public reason “must be ones that one can reasonably expect all citizens to endorse *who use the light of our common human reason*” (RPS 98). Wolterstorff goes on to point out that there really is no such thing as *common* human reason; there is no capacity called ‘reason’ which all humans inherently have in common. He claims that “what we come to believe by the use of our

reason (whatever Rawls might have in mind by that) is a function, in part, of what we already believe...[that is,] our comprehensive perspectives” (98).

This critique seems quite cogent, and also quite fatal for Rawls’ notion of public reason. For remember that a central part of public reason is that it involves some criterion we can reasonably expect our fellow citizens to endorse. Now, if what criterion we can reasonably expect them to endorse is a function of their comprehensive perspectives, then it seems there will be no single “public reason” which achieves overlapping consensus. “Public” reason will have to vary from group to group. For the accepted criterion will differ with each group. That is, without some common faculty of “reason” against which we can test our criterion of public reason, we are stuck testing it against each comprehensive perspective. But in this case, we no longer have some kind of public reason. We merely have reasons which are acceptable to some perspectives and not others.

The great achievement of Rawls’ idea of overlapping consensus was that he was thoroughly historicist, opting to base political conceptions of justice on the shared convictions of contemporary political culture, rather than some ahistorical, universal human faculty. However, his idea of public reason does exactly the opposite. Without some faculty of “reason” which is common to all citizens, we really have no basis for the requirement. All we have are principles which are accepted by some perspectives and not others. And Wolterstorff goes on to point out, quite elegantly, that “[in] a democracy...[we] listen and try to persuade. Typically our attempts at persuasion are on an ad hoc basis: offering to Republicans reasons that we think might appeal to them... to Democrats reasons that we think might appeal to them... to Christians reasons that we think might appeal to them” (RPS 108) and so on.

Taking a single criterion and assuming that since it isn’t based in some comprehensive perspective (which is a questionable claim in the first place), it will be reasonable to all, is not only theoretically problematic, but impractical. It is theoretically problematic just because there is no common human reason by which everyone will test that criterion. It is impractical for the same reason: since there is no common human reason, there is no one-size-fits-all argument to persuade others. If we are trying to reach consensus, we must offer each perspective reasons for why they ought to support this policy, not some a-perspectival criterion. Such a move is more likely to provoke an attack of this criterion than persuasion and agreement. Thus, Rawls’ notion of public reason, and therefore his rationale for the liberal position, seems to be fatally flawed.

Wolterstorff proposes, instead, his own “consocial” position. This position puts no restraint on the use of religious reasons: let citizens use whatever reasons they see fit. However, he does not mean by this that there are no appropriate restraints on citizens. Indeed, he identifies three: (1) civility in the manner of debate, (2) with the exception of extreme cases, that debate be conducted and resolved in accord with the laws of the

land, and (3) that the overall goal of the debates is political justice. In (1), Wolterstorff suggests virtues of civility which ought to be imposed upon the citizen. These are quite thick for him, involving listening to the other side and being open to changing one's mind. In (2), Wolterstorff makes the obvious claim that public debate ought to obey the law, unless there are extreme circumstances of massive injustice in the political systems. Finally, in (3), Wolterstorff actually sides with proponents of the liberal position. Rather than aim for some view of the good, our policies ought to aim for justice among people with competing views of the good. However, Wolterstorff's contention with the liberal tradition is that (3) does not restrict religious reasons, but rather a political agenda of mere self-interest.

Richard Rorty: Conversation-Stoppers and the Importance of Consensus

In 1994, Rorty wrote a book review entitled "Religion as a Conversation-stopper." In it, he argues that religion ought to be kept out of public debate for a number of reasons. First, he calls upon the "Jeffersonian compromise" of trading the privatization of religion for religious freedom. He thinks that, since religion is a private matter, it is irrelevant in public debate. This is why he famously calls religion a conversation-stopper. Rorty claims that invoking your understanding of God's will in public policy discussions is similar to telling your interlocutors: "'I would never have an abortion' or, 'Reading pornography is about the only pleasure I get out of life these days.' In these examples...the ensuing silence masks the group's inclination to say, 'So what? We weren't discussing your private life; we were discussing public policy. Don't bother us with matters that are not our concern'" (PSH 171). Rorty's idea is that religion is a matter of striving for private perfection, not a matter of proper public policy. Therefore, its intrusion into policy discussion can do nothing but stop the conversation at hand.

Rorty received a good deal of heat for this essay. In particular, Wolterstorff wrote a very persuasive essay called "An Engagement with Rorty." In it, Wolterstorff points to a great deal of views that he and Rorty have in common, and shows that Rorty's support of the liberal position is in deep conflict with his other views. Primarily, though, he argues that religion should not and need not be a conversation-stopper. For in normal conversation, people do not limit the discussion to premises held in common. He says, "In the conversation between Rorty and me today, are we limiting ourselves to premises held in common? How would we tell? Rorty and I each entered this conversation believing what we did, and we just started talking about the topic at hand" (ER, IV). He admits that interlocutors certainly probe for points of agreement in order to level persuasive arguments against one another, but this hardly qualifies as limiting the conversation to premises held in common.

Wolterstorff's critique had an impact on Rorty, prompting a response in 2003 entitled "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration." In it, Rorty openly admits that his

prior essay had been “hasty and insufficiently thoughtful” (RR 456). Nevertheless, he retains some elements of his former critique. In particular, he still wants to maintain that conversation-stoppers are bad for democracy. But he now recognizes both that religious appeals are not necessarily conversation-stoppers and that, ultimately, we all rest upon first principles which act as conversation-stoppers. What Rorty now wants to argue against are *mere* appeals to authority. He concludes that “instead of saying religion was a conversation-stopper, I should have simply said that citizens of a democracy should try to put off invoking conversation-stoppers as long as possible. We should do our best to keep the conversation going without citing unarguable first principles, either philosophical or religious” (RR 462). Rorty thinks we should do exactly what Wolterstorff suggested before: come to the conversation with our beliefs and try to construct a persuasive dialogue.

However, Rorty’s most interesting critique is a little more harsh on religion. In this critique, Rorty claims that religion ought to be “pruned back to the parish level” of “[helping] individuals find meaning in their lives, and...[serving] as a help to individuals in times of troubles” (RR 457). This will be replaced, on the social and institutional level, by “an increased sense of participation in the advance of humanity - theists and atheists together, shoulder to shoulder - toward the fulfillment of social ideals” (ibid). Here, Rorty taunts his beloved Deweyan conception of democracy. For Rorty, democracy is an end in itself, a symbol of ultimate importance. Democracy is good for “making possible the invention of new forms of human freedom, taking liberties never taken before” (PSH 126). All of this might seem very romanticized and almost religious. This is certainly true, something even Rorty will admit. But there is an important substantive claim here.

In his book, *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty suggests that the new ‘cultural’ left has a lot to learn from the old pre-sixties left, and that it ought to try to replicate them on many fronts. One front is the point just made. It is that, in dealing with oppression, the pre-sixties left “did so by proclaiming that all of us - black, white, and brown - are Americans, and that we should respect one another as such” (AOC 100). Rorty contrasts this with the new cultural left’s emphasis on “[respecting] one another in our differences” (ibid). That is, the intellectual tendency nowadays is to preserve our otherness and embrace it. This is seen in Wolterstorff’s claim that “[we] must learn to live with a politics of multiple communities” (RPS 109). Certainly there is truth to this, and it is perfectly reasonable, especially for oppressed groups, to take pride in one’s ‘otherness.’ But Rorty is wise to point out that “insofar as this pride prevents someone from also taking pride in being an American citizen...or from being able to join with straights or whites in reformist initiatives, it is a political disaster” (AOC 100). For the strategy of the pre-sixties approach - “the rhetorical question... ‘What do our differences matter, compared with our commonality as fellow Americans?’” (ibid) - was extremely effective at creating a sense of commonality. And Rorty is also wise to point

out that “only a rhetoric of commonality can forge a winning majority in national elections” (AOC 101).

The key point here is that we ought to emphasize our *similarities* more than our *differences*. Part of Rorty’s problem with religious rhetoric in politics is that it is immediately alienating to those outside of the faith-tradition. Contrast this with a rhetoric based on democracy and our fraternity as fellow Americans (black and white, theists and atheists), and we have a far more inclusive basis for creating a sense of commonality. Difference is important, but in free institutions we do not have to worry about maintaining difference; it is inevitable. What we do have to worry about is creating enough commonality and fraternity that democracy can flourish. In order to achieve consensus and move public policy forward, it is prudent to focus on points of agreement.

My Take: The Virtue of Agreeableness

I think that the central difference between Rorty and Wolterstorff has less to do with substantive matters and more to do with emphasis. That is, I see Rorty as stressing *democracy* as opposed to Wolterstorff stressing *liberalism*. Wolterstorff’s biggest concern is letting each person choose for themselves. This is why his bold statement is centered around *no* restraints on the reasons citizens are allowed to use. Let everyone use whatever reasons they want, so long as they don’t conflict with the liberties of others! Rorty, on the contrary, is primarily concerned with democracy: debate, consensus, and reform. This is why his bold statement is centered around the *conversation*. He is concerned with making a better, more interesting democratic conversation. He wants us to focus on our *commonality* as Americans so that we can advance *common* social ideals. Therefore, the real trick is to find a balance between these two: respecting our differences as liberals and working together as democrats.

My claim is that the most useful concept here is the virtue of agreeableness. As citizens of a liberal democracy, we have a duty to keep democratic institutions in good working order. One thing which is crippling to democratic institutions is deep, fundamental disagreement. This is the kind of disagreement which cannot be settled through conversations. This is also the kind of disagreement which cannot be settled through a majority vote, for, in this kind of disagreement, the minority always feels embittered and resentful. Therefore, I propose that as democratic citizens, we have a duty to strive for the virtue of agreeableness.

The virtue of agreeableness consists of many different things. Like all virtues, it has a basis and a form of response. The basis is the type of circumstance in which we can exhibit the virtue (or fail to do so). In the case of agreeableness, this circumstance is disagreement. Without disagreement, we would have no opportunities to be agreeable. The form of response is a little more difficult to characterize. Certainly, it consists of

really listening to others and being open to changing one's mind, as Wolterstorff claims of the virtue of civility. But, further, it consists of focusing on points of agreement to move policy discussion forward. The agreeable person wants to find what we agree on and how we can form a productive discussion based on those points of reference. The agreeable person is not interested in going back and forth in endless debates over fundamentals; the agreeable person wants to find shared opinions at whatever level she can. She does just what Rorty and Wolterstorff agreed upon: comes to the conversation with her beliefs and tries to start a constructive dialogue. The emphasis for the agreeable person, though, is on *constructive*.

The real problem with religious reasons is when they are used as Rorty feared: as mere appeals to authority. But the same is true of any comprehensive perspective. Since unarguable first principles are fundamental, the agreeable person wants to avoid reference to them for as long as possible. Her aim is to keep the conversation going by focusing on points of agreement. This is Rorty's democratic point. But the agreeable person is willing to level policy discussions on whatever grounds her interlocutor chooses. If it means achieving consensus, the agreeable person is perfectly willing to offer Christian reasons to Christians, Muslim reasons to Muslims, utilitarian reasons to utilitarians, and so on. Her aim is to keep the conversation going in order to achieve agreement, but because of this she is willing to keep it going in whatever fashion her interlocutor accepts. This is Wolterstorff's liberal point.

There are many advantages to this view. First, it does the same work that Rawls tried to do with public reason by giving us a method of resolving conflicts and appealing to our fellow citizens on grounds they can accept. But it does this not by some *principle*, which is static and therefore unsuitable to deal with the many comprehensive perspectives we are confronted by in a liberal democracy. Rather, it appeals to a *virtue*, which is dynamic and therefore perfectly suitable to deal with a procedure that is going to change with each interlocutor. That is, with a principle of public reason, we were stuck having to use the same criterion for each different group. However, with a virtue, we can account for the need to use different types of reasons with different interlocutors. This is because the virtue of agreeableness does not specify the particular points of agreement to be settled on, but rather the manner of behaving in response to disagreement.

Second, it accounts for Wolterstorff's arguments. It does not rest on a faulty foundationalist epistemology, opting instead for a purely moral approach. And it does not unduly restrict religious reasons, for it does not restrict religious reasons as such. Rather, it restricts any use of reasons which are fundamental, fixed points of argument. The virtue of agreeableness only puts restrictions on those who strive for disagreement, who are not interested in making constructive discussion. In fact, it coheres quite well with Wolterstorff's consocial position, which thinks that restrictions ought to be put on

the manner of citizens' behavior rather than the type of reasons they employ. The 'virtue of agreeableness' position wholeheartedly embraces this.

Third, it accounts for Rorty's concerns. It provides us with a duty to keep the conversation going, and to avoid unarguable first principles for as long as we can. It also gives us a commitment to commonality. It allows us to embody fraternity through a democratic discourse aimed towards our similarities, our commonly held convictions. If this ends up on the level of religion or philosophy, or merely political reforms, the agreeable person does not care. So long as she can find points of agreement from which to construct a discussion about the disagreements, she is satisfied.

My real contention in this paper is that the debate ought to switch from "religious" versus "secular" to fundamentalist versus pragmatist. The problem is not religious people with religiously motivated political positions, but fundamentalists of any kind who refuse to strive for the virtue of agreeableness when deciding and debating public policy. I hope that this essay has made this more plausible, and that in the future the reader will be more inclined to frame the discussion in the following way. Let us not look for religious or secular reasons, let us look for fundamentalist or pragmatist attitudes. For only the latter distinction will be helpful when deciding who is committed to liberal democracy and who is not.

Works Cited

Rawls, John. "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical." *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1985), pp. 223-251. [JAF]

Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999. [TJ]

Rawls, John. *Political Liberalism: Expanded Edition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. [PL]

Rorty, Richard. *Achieving Our Country*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998. [AOC]

Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999. [PSH]

Rorty, Richard. *The Rorty Reader*. ed. Christopher Voparil and Richard Bernstein. West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2010. [RR]

Wolterstorff, Nicholas and Robert Audi. *Religion in the Public Square*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997. [RPS]

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. "An Engagement With Rorty." From *Understanding Liberal Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199558957.003.0003> [ER]