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978-1-107-03679-6 - Making Religion Safe for Democracy: Transformation from Hobbes to Tocqueville

J. Judd Owen

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Making Religion Safe for Democracy
Transformation from Hobbes to Tocqueville

Does the toleration of liberal democratic society mean that religious faiths are left substantively intact, so long as they respect the rights of others? Or do liberal principles presuppose a deeper transformation of religion? Does life in democratic society itself transform religion? In *Making Religion Safe for Democracy*, J. Judd Owen explores these questions by tracing a neglected strand of Enlightenment political thought that presents a surprisingly unified reinterpretation of Christianity by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Thomas Jefferson. Owen then turns to Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of the effects of democracy on religion in the early United States. Tocqueville finds a religion transformed by democracy in a way that bears a striking resemblance to what the Enlightenment thinkers sought, while offering a fundamentally different interpretation of what is at stake in that transformation. *Making Religion Safe for Democracy* offers a novel framework for understanding the ambiguous status of religion in modern democratic society.

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Preface

Religion is back as a topic of discussion among Western scholars and intellectuals. The renewed interest in religion is largely driven by daily headlines, but years before Islamism commanded so much public attention scholars had begun to observe a resurgence of religion as a public and politically vital force across many faiths, both within the West and without. This resurgence may well seem stunning from the vantage point of several generations of Western intellectuals, to whom it was obvious that religion was progressively weakening in the modern era. Whether it was observed with delight, dismay, or indifference, the trend of modernity had seemed unmistakable until not long ago.

This resurgence has caused the sociology of religion to be turned on its ear with the crisis, if not the demise, of “secularization theory.” According to Peter Berger, “the key idea of the theory can be traced to the Enlightenment . . . Modernity necessarily brings with it a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals” (1999, 1). Jose Casanova observes that nearly all of the founding fathers of sociology accepted some version of secularization theory, which “may have been the only theory that has been able to attain a truly paradigmatic status in the modern social sciences” (1994, 17). But today, he asks, “who still believes in the myth of secularization?” (11). In fact the field has become divided, but a clear sign of the shift is that Berger, once one of secularization theory’s leading proponents, has changed his mind and now declares the theory to have been empirically “falsified.”

What is the importance of this changing landscape for political theorists? Is political theory, and in particular liberal political theory, as we find it today capable of responding, or even of grasping what is at

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stake? The leading school of liberal theory today is known as “political liberalism,” which stems from the teaching of John Rawls. Defenders of political liberalism see it as especially well equipped to address the problem of radically conflicting worldviews, including non-liberal religion. For political liberalism gets its name by distinguishing itself from “metaphysical” liberalism, that is to say, liberalism that is grounded in some foundational doctrine or worldview that justifies liberal principles. Political liberalism is not, like Enlightenment liberalism, grounded in a modern scientific worldview – Rawls is explicit: “Political liberalism is not a form of Enlightenment liberalism” (1996, xl). Similarly, political liberalism is not grounded in any religious doctrine. Political liberalism is as a matter of principle or necessity not grounded at all, but “free-standing.” Or rather, political liberalism would leave the question of the grounding of liberal principles to individuals, as and whether they feel the need for such grounding.

According to Rawls, “the philosophical question [political liberalism] primarily addresses” “should be ... sharply put this way: how is it possible for those affirming a religious doctrine that is based on religious authority, for example, the Church or the Bible, also to hold a reasonable political conception that supports a just democratic regime?” (1996, xxxix) Yet Rawls constructs the doctrine of political liberalism in such a way that this “philosophical question” is not addressed. For it does not matter to political liberalism *how* believers might hold those views required by a just democratic regime; it matters only that they do so, provided that they distinguish between properly political conceptions and properly “metaphysical” and hence politically irrelevant conceptions. The result would be an “overlapping consensus” around liberal political principles among those who differ deeply on theological and philosophical questions.

But here is the crucial difficulty for political liberalism: the line between the political and the metaphysical (which includes the theological), and indeed whether there is such a line at all, is deeply controversial. Moreover the question is not simply or primarily one of the foundation of liberal democratic principles, but the rightness and goodness of those principles. The foundational disagreement among liberals remains a crucial difficulty (cf. Chapter 1), but liberal democracy itself is at issue, and not merely the foundations of liberal democracy among those who already accept it. Political liberalism is attractive in appearing broadly inclusive of those who disagree about the most fundamental issues, but in fact it presupposes acceptance of (a certain

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interpretation of) liberal democratic principles. It can address only what Rawls calls a “reasonable pluralism,” not pluralism as such, where reasonableness is defined by acceptance of political liberalism. Both religious and non-religious challenges to political liberalism (perhaps even challenges of “metaphysical liberalisms” such as Enlightenment liberalism) are not met but excluded beforehand as unreasonable (cf. Owen 2001, ch. 5).

The leading school of liberal theory, then, is not well equipped to confront a world of resurgent religion, particularly religion that is uneasy with or rejects liberal democratic principles. In this respect, political liberalism is manifestly inferior to Enlightenment liberalism. For insofar as political liberalism looks to religion, it looks to “reasonable” religion, that is, religion that supports or at least does not conflict with liberal democratic principles. Enlightenment liberalism, in contrast, engaged a world in which religion permeated politics and which saw questions of orthodoxy and church authority as central to the highest purposes of law. It engaged a world in which what Rawls too loosely calls the “metaphysical” was entwined with and guided the political.

Here we approach the theme of the present study. Nothing is more characteristic of the difference between the early liberal philosophy of the Enlightenment and contemporary liberal theory than the fact that the early liberals engaged religion substantively and extensively. They engaged in disputes over theology and biblical interpretation with a view to transforming religion, as evidenced by writings that are largely neglected today, such as Locke’s *First Treatise* and *Reasonableness of Christianity*, parts II and III of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, and Spinoza’s *Theologico-political Treatise*. Contemporary liberal theory would not dream of offering its own theology or of attempting the correct or rational interpretation of scripture. Political liberalism, for example, refrains from speaking to substantive religious questions in a manner akin to the United States Supreme Court’s refusal to engage in theological disputes, with the aim of “neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.”¹ The Supreme Court, however, presupposes a foundation of legitimacy among American citizens that political theory cannot presuppose in the contest of ideas. It must make its case. Enlightenment liberalism recognized implicitly that liberalism is not

¹ *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393, U.S. 97, 104 (1968).

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and cannot be neutral with respect to religion, making it more suited to the challenge of politically resurgent religion.

Yet it would be absurd to assert that politically resurgent religion returns us to the situation faced by Enlightenment philosophy. We highlight two crucial differences that seem to be in tension with one another.

First and most obviously, the Enlightenment philosophers wrote at the dawn of the modern era. They looked forward to, or hoped to accelerate, a radical and still nascent break from the past scientifically, politically, theologically, and technologically, whereas we find ourselves far into the unforeseeably complicated advance of what they helped to initiate. More specifically, liberal democracy, which found its original theoretical justification in Enlightenment doctrines, has proved tremendously successful and resilient over the span of centuries. Its moral and practical superiority over its two great modern rivals, communism and fascism, famously led Francis Fukuyama to ask whether history had come to an end, in the sense that political and economic liberalism had proved to be the last man standing, the regime that had no serious rival on the horizon and was therefore bound to complete its sweep of the globe. If the resurgence of political religion, and the rise of Islamism in particular, has made Fukuyama's question appear premature (he has continued to defend his "end of history" thesis), the very recent plausibility of his argument nevertheless suffices to show how very different our situation is from that of the seventeenth century in regard to religiously based politics – the degree to which the balance has shifted.

The second difference is the emergence of what has been called the postmodern condition. Paradoxically, at the same time that liberal democracy appears so ascendant, faith in the universal validity of liberal democratic principles has perhaps never been lower. Liberals themselves, especially but not only liberal intellectuals, have lost confidence that there is any universally valid moral standard, including their own. This loss of confidence is not always in view, but it becomes most visible in comparison to the hopeful confidence once found among Enlightenment liberals, who spoke of natural and universal rights of man and who triumphed in the prospect of the victory of reason over benighted particularistic traditions. Today, liberals themselves are frequently inclined to speak of liberal principles as peculiarly Western or, as Richard Rorty put it, "ethnocentric." The attachment to liberal democracy remains, but without the belief that this attachment or any other can be defended rationally.

Moreover, this postmodern sense cannot be separated from at least the occasional dissatisfaction with the modern way of life that prevails in

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liberal societies. Liberals, like other modern human beings, commonly regret the weakening of at least certain aspects of tradition owing to the rise of modern, individualistic, commercial “monoculture.” We feel both the attraction of human rights, freedom, and limited government, on the one hand, and an aversion to the materialistic and spiritually thin way of life fostered in modern democratic society, on the other.² As Jurgen Habermas has observed, even or precisely the most secular liberal may feel “an awareness of what is missing,” that is, spiritually missing from secular reason (2010). It is unlikely to be a coincidence that a resurgence of political religion would occur amid postmodern doubts about the capacity of secular reason to establish universally valid moral and political principles.

From an American perspective, however, the story of religion and modern democracy looks rather different from that of decline and resurgence. The United States is as modern as any country in the world, and its political founding occurred in the heyday and under the profound influence of Enlightenment political philosophy. And yet America has long stood out among modern nations for its religiosity. Alexis de Tocqueville used the American example to refute an early version of “secularization theory,” which he associated with “the philosophers of the eighteenth century,” that is, those French *philosophes* whose bold critique of religion subsequently became closely associated with the Enlightenment (282). Tocqueville explains America’s exceptional religiosity largely by pointing to Puritan influence, but he also shows the profound transformation of American religion under the influence of democratic society as Puritanism faded. The religion of the Americans Tocqueville observed was in place and owed much of its character to the Puritans, but that religion had changed markedly from Puritanism.

We now approach still closer to the theme of the present study. For while Tocqueville attributes the transformation of American religion to the nature of democracy, not to the influence of the Enlightenment – which he chiefly associates with French thinkers of the eighteenth century – the transformation he observed closely resembles the religious transformation sought by certain *English* Enlightenment thinkers of the *seventeenth century*. For, despite their clear disagreement on religious toleration, Hobbes and Locke were in considerable agreement on how

² “Even if the typical character types of liberal democracy are bland, calculating, petty, and unheroic, the prevalence of such people may be a reasonable price to pay for political freedom.” (Rorty 1991, 190)

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religion needed to be changed in order to make it compatible with the new political science. They sought, in remarkably similar ways, to prepare religion for an era of enlightenment.

This transformative agenda is the clearest sign that liberal philosophy in its original form understood that liberalism could not be neutral to religion in the way that political liberalism seeks to be neutral to religion. Liberalism cannot be neutral in its foundations; it cannot be “freestanding.” As we shall see in the opening chapter, this does not mean that in its historical origins and development, liberalism was or has ever been foundationally unified on the question of religion. But agreement on certain liberal policies amid foundational tension or struggle should not be confused with foundational neutrality.

The transformative agenda that we will explore in the following also indicates the extent to which a modern liberal democratic society can sustain religion of a certain sort, or within certain bounds. This takes us to another, perhaps surprising, reason to reconsider early Enlightenment liberal philosophy today – with a view to addressing Habermas’s sense of “what is missing” from a thoroughgoing secularism that is more clearly associated with the later Enlightenment. Did both Hobbes and Locke simply seek to make religion more rational, as they saw it, and tame it? Or did either of them promote religious transformation as they did in part also out of a concern with the spiritual thinness of the materialistic individualism that otherwise permeated their political doctrines? To what extent does religion make a positive contribution to their teachings, and to what extent does it remain as a concession to the limits of enlightenment? Or, as a further alternative that we will explore, did they suppose that, because “the people are enlightened little by little” (Hobbes, *Opera Philosophica* 2:128), an enlightened transformation of religion would start a process of a more thoroughgoing secularization over time? If so, with a view to what end?

It is far more clearly the case for Tocqueville than for either Hobbes or Locke that religion speaks to a vital need of both individual and society in enlightened democratic times. This is one of the chief reasons for his keen interest in America. He not only saw in America the most democratic nation in a world moving toward an ever more democratic future, but also observed the strength of American religion, which stood in contrast to the weakening of religion amid the advance of European democracy. Could American religion serve as a much-needed model for the future of democracy? The answer to that question required a careful assessment of how religion in America had been transformed by democracy, for better and worse.

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The study that follows begins and ends with religion in American democracy, but we seek ultimately a better understanding of the place of religion in modern democracy by tracing certain tensions and ambiguities found in the American case to their theoretical core. We will see that the simple opposition of the religious and secular, as it is often spoken of today, is inadequate. The trend of modern democracy remains one of secularization, but at least in its early Enlightenment and American forms, that secularization remains bound up with and profoundly influences religion. Religion remains, but transformed. This transformed religion is ambiguous, and what we could call the different views of Hobbes, Locke, and Tocqueville of the same phenomena lead us to the heart of the disagreement among their political teachings.

Our first view of this ambiguity comes from a comparison between two strong defenders of religious freedom in the American revolutionary era: Thomas Jefferson and Isaac Backus. Jefferson, the Enlightenment rationalist, and Backus, the Calvinist-Baptist, may initially seem tailor-made for the foundational neutrality of political liberalism, but closer examination reveals that religious freedom for them was not only an extension of their radically opposed views on religion but also an instrument for the promotion of those views throughout society. We see, not foundational neutrality, but an unsettled contest for hearts and minds.

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