Politicising Religions. Religious Pluralism and Democratic Judgment

Abstract
This essay deals with the question how the challenges of religious pluralism for democratic political communities are conceived within political theoretical discourses. The point of view is what could be called a contextual conception of democracy that democratic decision-making and judgment takes place in a field of political narratives that constitute imaginations of political communities, their points of identification and sense of belonging. Within this field the democratic negotiations of communities take place. In the present situation of religious pluralism the challenge for national sovereignty and democracy is articulated not only from the inside of the national political community, but also from the outside. The religious communities are trans-national in character. They are trans-national because their points of identification and sense of belonging transcend the horizon of the national political community. At the same time they are trans-national because they take part in the national political community. Thus, the processes of democratic decision-making and judgment faced the present situation of religious pluralism can be characterised by the tension between de-nationalisation and re-nationalisation. This tension is crucial for understanding the contextual frame of democratic judgment under the conditions of what is conceived as religious pluralism.

The aim of the essay is to discuss the role of religions in public debates and political life with reference to the democratic negotiations of political community that characterise the present situation of religious pluralism. This is to be done as a reflection upon the double sense of politicising religions in contemporary political theory. Furthermore, the aim is to point at the tension between de-nationalisation and re-nationalisation that these political theoretical discourses on religious pluralism and democratic political community are blind to.

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At the moment there seems to be a tendency in European and American political theory to claim that religion can play a legitimate role in public debates and political life. Some people defend this point of view with reference to the religious heritage of a national political community and the benevolent influence of dominant (Christian) confessions in everyday practices and cultural self-understandings. Other people conceive the affirmation of religions in public debates and political life to be a necessary way of dealing with religious pluralism in democratic political regimes and cultures and, thus, they emphasise the equal worth of religious citizens and their freedom of religion. No matter what, they agree that religion can be legitimate in democratic politics and in different degrees they untie the strict separation of religion and politics associated to the political doctrines of secularism. In few words, this is a common denominator of the three books to be reviewed in this essay. The focal point is how democratic negotiations of political communities are conceived in response to the religious pluralism of European and American societies. How does political theoretical discourse conceive the relationship between religious and political imaginations of communities, points of identification and sense of belonging to be settled in democratic decision-making and judgment?

This question of the relationship between religion and politics is included in the double sense of politicising religions characteristic for the actual challenges of religious pluralism in democratic political communities. The nexus, politicising religions is both a subjective and objective genitive. It means that in the present situation religions are both politicising and being politicised. Some religious people enter the political stage in order to influence the political decision-making and prioritising of common values with reference to their religious believes and convictions. At the same time, as religious people they are regulated, positively or negatively, by a broad range of public policies and political rhetoric and symbols or they become such an object of political regulation due to the actual articulation of religion/politics puzzles. Thus, the tension within the double sense of politicising religions is a
crucial aspect of how democratic negotiations of political communities under circumstances of religious pluralism are conceived in political theoretical discourse. Furthermore, this tension indicates the unstable relationship between religion and politics and consequently the multiple possible meanings of a political doctrine of secularism that the books under review untie. This needs to be elaborated somewhat.

In the dominant European and American discourses on religion and politics secularism constitutes the lens through which religious pluralism are viewed. Secularism forms a vocabulary and scheme of thought that claim the separation of religion and politics as institutional arrangement and individual reason – i.e. political institutions are to be organised in such a manner that they are independent and free of religions. This organisation of the political realm is justified by the use of secular or public reason – i.e. in order to organise a neutral political realm and take impartial political decisions based on commonly accessible reasons one has to translate religious believes and convictions into a common political language and, thus, not take these into consideration. In other words, one could characterise the dominant European and American discourses of secularism by terms of the institutional arrangement and individual reason that separates religion and politics for the purpose of tolerance, impartiality, neutrality and universality, liberty and equality. However, the recent tendencies in political theorising to be discussed in this essay subsume the strict separation of religion and politics advocated by political doctrines of secularism to the democratic negotiations of political community. Thus, the secularism is not understood as the precondition of democracy; rather, it is a narrative in negotiation and contestation with other narratives within a field of democratic politics constitutive of communal imaginations, points of identification and sense of belonging. This emphasises the political processes and multiple dimensions of situating secularism in the plural within the contextual frames of democracies and concrete democratic negotiations of the religion/politics relationship rather than conceiving secularism in the singular as a precondition of democracy.

II

In The Liberal Conscience Lucas Swaine points at the role of religious believes and convictions in the public debates and political life of a liberal constitutional democracy by discussing the reasons for religious people to affirm liberal principles and institutions. As point of departure he has the hard case of theocrats because he considers the crucial puzzle of religion and politics to be the actual conflicts between theocrats and liberals on liberal rights and freedoms. On both sides, one does not take the
other part serious, but conceives him to be either irrational or illegitimate. However, Swaine understands the task of a liberal government to establish a frame of mutual co-existence rather than unanimous opposition. Therefore, he emphasises that in order to discuss whether theocrats could have reasons for affirming liberal principles and institutions one has to let their own religious believes and convictions to be decisive rather than require them to translate their points of view into a secular language common for the political sphere. It is a matter of understanding and working on these points of view in dialogue and engagement involving both theocrats and liberals. In that sense, Swaine unties the provisos of reasoning associated to the political doctrines of secularism letting the theocrats have a voice on own premises and commitments to otherworldly values in public debates and political life.

Swaine conceives his argument to be an elaboration on the political liberalism of John Rawls by emphasising the reasonableness of the theocrats’ commitments to their religious idea of the good and, thus, the possibility that theocrats give reasons for and thereby affirm liberal principles and institutions. The focal point of this elaboration of a political liberalism is the three principles of liberty of conscience that Swaine formulate convinced that theocrats by reason would go along with these principles because they guarantee their freedom of religion and their religious believes, convictions, rituals and practices in a respectful and peaceful manner. The three principles are: a) the principle of rejection that one must be free by conscience to reject what one conceives as lesser religious doctrines and conceptions of the good; b) the principle of affirmation that one by conscience must be free to accept an idea of the good; and c) the principle of distinction that one by conscience must be free to distinguish between what one conceives as good and bad doctrines and conceptions of the good. According to Swaine, theocrats affirm these principles by reasoning because the different religious conceptions of the good that they live by are not unambiguous and without dispute. If anything, they are under continuous debate and interpretation. As part of such interpretive processes Swaine points at the possibilities for theocrats to affirm the principles of liberty of conscience that he conceives to be the backbone of a liberal democratic regime responding to the challenges of religious pluralism. Thus, with reference to the three principles of liberty of conscience and the reasoning affirming these principles theocrats and liberals constitute in common dialogue a political community.

However, the question is whether Swaine’s elaborated political liberalism offers an adequate answer to the challenges of theocrats for liberal rights and freedoms as claimed. On the one hand, Swaine tends to displace the focus from the liberal political principles and institutions to the points of view of the theocrats letting the theocrats being involved in political reasoning on their own religious premises and otherworldly values. On the other hand, he seems to adjust these points of view and the reasoning of the theocrats to the liberal principles and institutions and, thus, maintaining the
priority of the political sphere over religions. The reasoning suggested by Swaine seems to be enforced indirectly. For example, Swaine writes in the conclusion: “The point is that it will generally be better to try to convince or persuade theocrats to turn away from their more illiberal inclinations before leaving it to government to employ coercion against them” (p. 161). At the end of the day, it is about political power reiterating the opposition between theocrats and liberals. The harmonious order of a political community adopting the religious pluralism and constituted by public reasoning happens to be closer to the logic of separating religion and politics of the political doctrines of secularism. Furthermore, this order is rather an enforced modus vivendi than a reasoned affirmation of liberal principles and institutions from both theocrats and liberals based on an overlapping consensus as claimed. In other words, there is a shift in focus from the subjective genitive to the objective genitive in the negotiation of the religion/poitics relationship characterised by the nexus, politicising religions. Thus, although sensitive to the religious voices, especially theocrats possible political reasoning, Swaine’s elaboration of political liberalism reiterates the pitfalls of the political doctrines of secularism.

III

In his latest collection of essays, Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion (Between Naturalism and Religion) 3 Jürgen Habermas engages the debates on the role of religion in late modern societies, especially the political role of religion in the public sphere. The point of reference for Habermas’ engagement with religion in public debates and political life reflects the relationship between political liberalism and deliberative democracy. 4 Furthermore, he defends some conditions for religions to have a voice in political matters within this frame criticising the strict separation of religion and politics forwarded by the political doctrines of secularism. Therefore, one can point at more dimensions for an indirect dialogue between Habermas and Swaine on the constitution of political communities. However, Habermas would dissociate from Swaine’s political liberal stance because the idea of the public use of reason by liberals and theocrats suggested by Swaine reflects the liberal principles and institutions of the liberty of conscience in a narrow sense only without including broader will and opinion formation in the public sphere. In contrast, Habermas emphasises the deliberation of political matters in the public sphere as decisive for the inclusion of religious arguments and points of view in public debates and political life. It is not only a question of liberal principles and institutions, but also the inclusive character of the public sphere and the deliberative mode of democracy. Thus, in a normative political sense Habermas distinguishes his own position from political liberalism by emphasising the public
sphere as the site where religious arguments and points of view are voices among others in the deliberation of political matters. With this point of reference the religious believes and convictions of citizens are recognised as equal worth and source of energy and engagement in social matters and democracy. This is a crucial feature of a political community.

At the same time, however, Habermas defends a secular state that has to filter religious arguments and points of view beforehand. The secular state has to be neutral and impartial in order to treat all citizens equal irrespective of ethnic and religious belonging, social and economic status, gender and sexual orientation. Whereas religious arguments and points of view are legitimate in the public sphere, they have to be translated in order to gain legitimacy in political institutions, especially parliaments and parliamentary political decision-making. From Habermas' point of view, this normative political defence of a secular state has epistemic pre-conditions in terms of cognitive conditions and epistemic attitudes that prioritise the distinction between faith and knowledge. In other words, when making legitimate political decisions one has to be able to distinguish between faith and knowledge with reference to the latter as a kind of insight that can be validated and, thus, constitute the basis for political decision-making. The political processes are conceived as learning processes creating self-reflexivity and self-critique on the sides of both religious and secular people. This goes on as a process of mutual recognition open toward religious arguments and points of view in the public sphere and cooperative acts of translation although one does not necessarily reach reasonable agreements. However, the telos of the learning process going on in the deliberation of common matters that involves both religious and secular people is the translation of particularistic points of view, e.g. religious, into a common language. Therefore, it ends up giving priority to an idea of secular reason in political institutions because of the required neutrality and impartiality of the state.

Thus, Habermas' point of view emphasises the open attitudes between religious and secular citizens and the deliberation of common matters in the public sphere that recreates the liberal political culture with a much broader perspective than Swaine's focus on the liberal principles of liberty of conscience. Furthermore, he founds the normative political principles of how one “ought” to solve problems of the religion/politics relationship in an epistemological perspective of how one “can” approach these problems cognitively in the political processes of democratic negotiation in the public sphere. These two dimensions constitute what Habermas calls an ethics of citizenship and, thus, they are constitutive of his conception of a political community. However, normatively he ends up with a position similar to Swaine's political liberalism giving priority to the liberal political institutions and their implicit mode of reasoning requiring translation of other kinds of reasoning. In that sense, Habermas adds the democratic role of the public sphere open toward religious believes and convictions
in their own terms to the political doctrines of secularism without abandoning secularism at all. He makes a shift in focus from the subjective to the objective genitive of the nexus, politicising religions, like Swaine does. Although epistemologically founded Habermas’ position seems to be political in his self-understanding of the contestability of his position. This opens for an ongoing democratic negotiation of the religion/politics relationship rather than the institutional closure just mentioned.

IV

In Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship, the third book under review, Paul J. Weithman asks the question of the role of religion in political decision-making from the point of view of how religious people can be good citizens in a liberal democratic regime and political culture. Contrary to Habermas and Swaine, Weithman does not presuppose that religious arguments and points of view are to be translated at a moment in the democratic deliberation and political process. The political community of a liberal democratic regime consists of religious pluralism and, therefore, it does not make sense to give priority to secular liberal principles and political institutions and their implicit mode of reasoning if one wants to treat all citizens equally. Rather, one has to be sensitive to their comprehensive doctrines in their own terms. This use of words indicates that the dialogue established between Habermas, Swaine and Weithman adopts the vocabulary of John Rawls’ political liberalism also mentioned in the former two sections. However, unlike Swaine, Weithman focus on the soft case of benevolent religious movements and institutions rather than the hard case of theocrats. From his point of view the crucial argument is that churches prepare their members to be able to recognise and participate in common matters. By practical experience they understand themselves as participants in collective action and, thus, religious belonging can pave the way for civil education and an ethics of citizenship.

Weithman emphasises that religious people may participate in the democratic deliberation and political decision-making on the basis of their religious believes and convictions as long as they are convinced that their participation and points of view contribute to the common good. He considers this kind of justification as an obligation of citizenship. If one is able to take this justification that one contributes to the common good into consideration, then one could characterise one’s comprehensive point of view reasonable whether religious or secular. In other words, the political community consists of a plurality of reasonable comprehensive doctrines. However, according to Weithman they disagree deeply on the interpretations of the principles of a liberal democratic regime. There is no right mode of reasoning for citizens to affirm the liberal principles and institutions. There is not one ground to affirm
these principles and institutions, but as long as one has a ground convincing oneself that one can cooperate with others and contribute to the common goods it is sufficient; as long as one participates in the conflict of interpretation of the liberal principles and institutions from one's religious point of view without violating them, then one has a legitimate voice in the democratic negotiation taking place in the public debates and political decision-making. Therefore, it is violating the equal worth of all citizens to adopt the political liberal language of an overlapping consensus where one affirms the liberal principles by the public use of reason. The idea of an overlapping consensus is seen in opposition to a modus vivendi, i.e. the pejorative description of a political and social stability established by mere power balance. Rather than adopting this opposition, one should open one's eyes for other possibilities, according to Weithman, for example the one he prefers, a modus vivendi stabilised by habit that constitutes decent political institutions and a decent political community.

He elaborates further on this preference for a modus vivendi as characteristic of the democratic deliberation and political process where citizens are reasonable, but disagree deeply by pointing at multiple variations and degrees of religious believes and convictions, arguments and points of view that could be brought into play in the public debates and political decision-making. In other words, one has to be sensitive to the concrete circumstances and contextual features of the political communities where the religion/politics relationships are questioned rather than giving priority to abstract criteria of reasoning. According to Weithman, the focal point should be the concrete habits, values and norms of a country that citizens can learn and incorporate by practical experience of public deliberation and common action. At this point, the churches can also contribute by preparing their members to this civil engagement. In that sense, Weithman emphasises the crucial role of concrete national political communities, their imaginations and practices, points of identification and sense of belonging as the natural frame for public reasoning and democratic negotiations of religion/politics puzzles. This contextual conception of democratic political processes includes sensitivity to the actual existing religious groups and communities of a society and their contested points of view and self-understandings. However, these concrete habits, values and norms of a country constitute a point of reference that indicates a shift from the subjective to the objective genitive of the nexus, politicising religions and, thus, they institute a boundary for inclusion/exclusion of religions by political regulation. It seems, then, that Weithman could have went a step further in his critique of the political doctrines of secularism as the standard approach to the religion/politics relationship instead of reiterating the dominant habits, values and norms of a national political community.
Although very different within the frame of liberal political theory and the liberal debate of the question of the religion/politics relationship the three books under review by Habermas, Swaine and Weithman seem to fall over the same stumbling block. They approach the question of the legitimate role of religion in public debates and political life from the point of view of a national political regime, political principles and institutions, public discourse, political culture, values, norms and self-understanding. From this point of view they bring relevant principled matters, democratic political processes and practical experiences of the religion/politics relationship constitutive for their conceptions of political community to the fore with the aim of going beyond a dualistic opposition between religion and politics based on moral and political certainties. Instead they aim at promoting engagement, dialogue and interpretation of the citizenry by some kind of democratic negotiation of moral and political uncertainties and ambiguities. However, they seem to blind to the trans-national character of the actual religion/politics puzzles constitutive for the contests over the imaginations of both national and international political community. In other words, in the present situation of religious pluralism the challenge for national sovereignty and democracy is articulated not only from the inside of the national political community, but also from the outside. For example, the religious communities are trans-national in character. They are trans-national because their points of identification and sense of belonging transcend the horizon of the national political community. At the same time they are trans-national because they take part in the national political community. Furthermore, the references to human rights in national and international political debates and legal judgments have a similar trans-national character. The ideas of human rights and freedoms travel between different contexts where their content is interpreted and contested. Thus, it would be valuable to approach the processes of democratic decision-making and judgment faced the present situation of religious pluralism in different national contexts from the point of view of this tension between de-nationalisation and re-nationalisation in order to emphasise the plural perspectives on how the relationship between religion and politics can be handled democratically. In other words, the theoretical work to be done on the question of the religion/politics relationship has to go beyond the political liberal language and include this tension crucial for understanding the contextual frames of democratic judgment and decision-making under the conditions of what is conceived as religious pluralism in order to affirm and criticise the pluralism of democratic political communities.
Put briefly, these are the elements constitutive in Robert Audi's articulation of secularism that is one of the main targets of criticism in the three books under review, cf. Robert Audi, Religious Commitment and Secular Reason (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).


References