



## Religion as Seditious: On Liberalism's Intolerance of Real Religion

### Abstract

'Political liberalism' claims to manifest the real meaning of democracy, including crucially the toleration of religion – it is through the history of this toleration that it acquired its current form and power. Political liberalism is however, I argue, *more* hostile to religion than was ever dreamt *possible* in the philosophy of avowedly anti-clerical Enlightenment Liberalism. For it refuses point-blank ever to engage in serious debate with religion. It considers it of no consequence. It allows religion only to be 'outward forms', meaningless ceremony. Political liberalism annihilates religion.

The time has come for Western intellectuals to re-assess their allegiance to a tacit (or indeed explicit) secularism, and to overturn the annihilation of religion. Religion or spirituality that brings forth the best of humanity may well in fact be essential to addressing the cultural crisis of our times. Political liberalism is the most extreme fundamentalism of them all, in its insistence upon every political claim being purely political, and not at all religious. Political liberalism considers genuine religion seditious. The way beyond the clash of fundamentalisms must be genuinely open to (genuine) religion. (If that involves 'sedition', then so be it.)

Such openness to religion requires openness to the possibility that - far from reducing religion to a 'lowest common denominator' if it is to enter into public affairs at all (via Rawls's 'proviso' or something like it), and neutering it otherwise to being an entirely private and inconsequential merely ritualistic matter – we might (instead) seek a 'highest common factor' approach to affirmative religions that escape the narrow constraints laid down by liberalism. Such a 'common faith' may even be vital to human survival.

### Introduction

Liberal political philosophy is inevitably an individualist philosophy. In spite of the ever-growing ecological crisis and the still-simmering financial and economic crisis and the cultural crisis of values in our world, all arguably

resulting from an excess of individualism and of liberalism, it remains the dominant political philosophy of our time. Most political philosophers, many left-leaning intellectuals and some ‘cultural theorists’ continue to be attracted in particular by the secular promise of liberalism - and this perhaps helps prevent them from discarding or opposing liberalism.

This essay considers the alleged tolerance of contemporary liberal political philosophy toward religion. It focuses on the mature thought of the late John Rawls, usually said to be the greatest and certainly the most influential recent liberal thinker. Moreover, Rawls was a thinker whose thought was vitally *formed* around the question of how to extrapolate the principle of ‘religious toleration’, fundamental to the roots of modern liberalism, into a general political philosophy: thus his significance as a topic for such a discussion as this paper is embarked upon is unparalleled.<sup>1</sup> Rawls is taken here as the exemplary intellectual representative of liberal political philosophy; if this paper succeeds in damning his thought, then liberalism in general can be taken presumptively to be badly tarnished.<sup>2</sup>

My suspicion, the most consequential of my contentions in this essay, is that the attitude of liberals toward religion, found in highly-focused form in Rawls’s discussion of ‘Equal liberty of conscience’ in his epochal work, *A Theory of Justice*,<sup>3</sup> and in greater detail occupying a central position in *Political Liberalism*, may well now be a cause of rather than a palliative to the ‘clash of fundamentalisms’ writ large in the world today.<sup>4</sup> I believe liberalism to be

---

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia, 1996; henceforth, ‘PL’), xxviii.

<sup>2</sup> In future work, I would hope to justify the controversial matter of including under this heading also the work of Habermas, whose celebrated differences from Rawls are, I believe, *inconsequential* from the point of view of the present essay, in terms of both general topic and specific content. To indicate very briefly why:

Habermas, especially in recent years (see his *Between naturalism and religion* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008)) has appeared to move considerably beyond Rawls, in his generosity toward and openness toward religion. Especially, his explicit allowance that the ‘informal public sphere’ (the world of opinion-makers, candidates for election etc.) need not be subject to any Rawlsian proviso of translatability into secular discourse may seem welcome. But the essential problem is pointed out by Paolo Flores d’Arcais, in his ‘Democracy on the cross’ (*New Left Review* 62 (2010), 154-160), 158: ‘Habermas does not explain how the secular imperative is to be imposed upon those who hold elective office, and nullified for candidates, opinion-makers and citizens.’ So long as the secular imperative is imposed upon those who hold elective office - so long as religion is forbidden any legitimated power in the secular world - then religion is bound to be neutered. Thus I would argue that Habermas fails in the end to avoid the fate of Rawls, if Rawls is fated (in the present paper) to end up condemned as an inveterate opponent of religion. ... But to establish this case adequately would of course take much more space than is possible here. The present essay aims only to capture Rawlsian liberalism and whatever other liberalism(s) as a matter of fact end(s) up being caught within the purview of the arguments given herein.

<sup>3</sup> All references are to the first edition, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: OUP, 1971). Henceforth ‘*ToJ*’. In support of my thought that the centrality of the liberal conception of religious tolerance to Rawls’s entire philosophy, one might usefully cite also PL 10, where Rawls remarks that ‘political liberalism applies the principle of toleration to philosophy itself.’ Here Rawls is acknowledging the great importance of the principle of toleration in his earlier work, and only regretting that he did not go *quite far enough*, in *ToJ*, in applying it: it already encompassed people’s conceptions of the good and their ‘interests’, and only omitted to include an understanding that philosophical ‘foundations’ -- crucially, of liberalism itself, as a ‘comprehensive’ doctrine -- could not be expected to subsist as generally shared beliefs in a modern, pluralistic society.

<sup>4</sup> In going along with Tariq Ali’s notion of the ‘clash of fundamentalisms’, I need to raise two provisos: (1) I do not believe that most of the ‘fundamentalist terrorism’ in the world today is *primarily* religiously

fundamentally intolerant of real religion, or true spirituality; I believe that this foments certain worrying currents of violent sedition at large in the world today; and I suggest that certain other seditious and non-seditious currents of religious (and non-religious) thought and action offer a resolution, a way out of the cul-de-sac of liberal political philosophy. I think, in short, that political philosophers, the contemporary left and radical intellectual thinkers in general should ditch liberalism, question their commitment to secularism, and consider the fertile possibilities that there are in alliance with religion. I will argue, then, that faith and liberal political philosophy are incompatible, but that this is a problem for liberalism, and need not be for philosophy.

The real cash-value of this paper is to be found in the novel conclusion that it argues for: that, *contra* liberalism, there may be a ‘highest common factor’, a ‘common faith’, among the positive life-affirming religions of our world, that offers a vital chance for a fulfilling life for our civilization, our species. We do not need to fall back on (what I shall argue is) the neutered, ‘lowest common denominator’ approach to religion that liberalism enforces.

### Rawls on religion

In order to understand where contemporary political liberalism stands on religion, we can do no better than to go straight to heart of John Rawls’s work. The following is said by Rawls himself to be a piquant formulation of the central question of *Political Liberalism*, his later masterwork: ‘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?’ (*PL*, xxxix). Rawls tries to show that and how it is.

The central *problem* that emerges with Rawls’s undertaking is this: How is it possible for those affirming a religious doctrine to take seriously their right to uphold that doctrine, if they are deemed unreasonable as soon as they try *qua* being religious believers to actually do anything that will directly affect the regime or its policies? How can they be expected to treat as Just a regime that will oppress them just as soon as they threaten its ‘neutrality’ (or ‘impartiality’)<sup>5</sup> between conceptions of the good?

---

rather than politically motivated: i.e. I think that Christian (and Judaic) fundamentalism is not as significant as geo-political strategy and capitalist imperatives in motivating the devastatingly-violent state-terrorist foreign policy of the U.S.A. (and Israel, and, by extension, of Britain, Australia, and a few other countries); and I think that Islamic fundamentalism is not as significant as anger at Western foreign policy, at the belittling and oppressing of the Arab world and Arab peoples, etc, in motivating non-state terrorist atrocities such as September 11 2001 and the Summer 2005 London bombings (let alone much of the patriotic resistance struggle in Iraq, fanatical anti-Shia thugs such as the late Zarqawi aside). Evidence for the latter view can be found in bin Laden’s publicly-available statements on the motivations for his ‘jihad’ (the treatment of Iraq, the treatment of the Palestinians, and the occupation of Saudi Arabia) and also in the extant evidence (also publicly available) on the Iraq-related motivations of the 2005 London bombers. (2) In a certain sense, *the most significant and extreme ‘fundamentalism’ of them all* may turn out to be liberalism itself. I explain this bold remark towards the close of the current paper.

<sup>5</sup> The word typically used by later Rawls is ‘impartial’: see e.g. *PL* xxi ff. See also *PL* xl, for the spelling out of how ‘neutrality’ is understood, in the later Rawls.

We cannot and (luckily) need not go in any great detail into the change between Rawls's early and his later thought here;<sup>6</sup> but it is of no little significance to note that possibly the greatest virtue which Rawls himself is inclined to claim for his later work as opposed to his early work is that Rawls says that he is, in *PL*, giving more space to religion to flourish (or to decline -- whichever occurs, the state has no interest in the matter) than he did in *ToJ*, let alone than Enlightenment liberalism did. Enlightenment liberalism typically endorsed anticlericalism, fought against religion(s) (especially against established religion(s)), and explicitly purveyed its own alternative comprehensive philosophy. *ToJ* allegedly did neither of the first two things; but later Rawls came to see that it did nevertheless constitute a 'comprehensive philosophical doctrine', and one that many in society could not reasonably be expected to share. Arguably, this is tantamount to admitting that such comprehensive liberalism is *not* neutral between conceptions of the good, after all. So Rawls needed a way to reinstate the famed neutrality/impartiality of liberalism between different worldviews, a way suited to our arguably particularly-pluralistic contemporary world, with its wide range of faiths and 'non-faiths', etc. Within the agreed, assumed framework of a constitutionalist democratic society, no longer pretending to deduce from first (rational) principles the preferability of such a society, Rawls claimed in *PL* to have found out how to reinstate that neutrality: via his exclusively *political* (not metaphysical, not 'comprehensive') conception of liberalism.

Here is what Rawls states about what he has thus achieved, in the Conclusion to his concluding essay, an essay which restated the ideas of *PL* in a way that he found more finally satisfactory, 'The idea of public reason revisited' [henceforth IPPR]<sup>7</sup>:

'Throughout, I have been concerned with a torturing question in the contemporary world, namely: Can democracy and comprehensive doctrines, religious or non-religious, be compatible? And if so, how? At the moment a number of conflicts between religion and democracy raise this question. To answer it political liberalism makes the distinction between a self-standing political conception of justice and a comprehensive doctrine. A religious doctrine resting on the authority of the Church or the Bible is not, of course, a liberal comprehensive doctrine: its leading religious and moral values are not those, say, of Kant or Mill. Nevertheless, it may endorse a constitutional democratic society and recognize its public reason. Here it is basic that public reason is a political idea and belongs to the category of the political. Its content is given by the family of (liberal) political conceptions of justice satisfying the criterion of reciprocity. *It does not trespass upon religious beliefs and injunctions insofar as these are consistent with the essential constitutional liberties, including the freedom of religion and liberty of conscience.* There is, or need be, no war between religion and democracy. *In this respect political liberalism is sharply different from and rejects Enlightenment Liberalism, which historically attacked orthodox Christianity.*' (IPRR 611; emphases added)

<sup>6</sup> I do so in my 'On Rawls's failure to preserve genuine (freedom of) religion,' forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup> All citations are taken from Rawls's *Collected Papers* (ed. Freeman; Harvard: HUP, 1999).

I can now straightforwardly and succinctly state the response (that I wish to defend) to these claims: I say that 'Political liberalism' is *more* hostile to religion than was ever dreamt *possible* in the philosophy of Enlightenment Liberalism. For it refuses point-blank ever to engage in serious debate with it. It considers it of no consequence.

And this is a potentially-fatal insult to religion. A religion can bear being hated; it cannot bear being deflated into an insignificant matter of merely ceremonial interest, with no ringing meaning for all, no existential or ethical depth, no consequential action-oriented message. Or as Rawls's deep and long-standing critic Michael Sandel puts it: 'On the liberal conception, we respect our fellow citizen's moral and religious convictions by ignoring them (for political purposes), by leaving them undisturbed, by carrying on political debate without reference to them... // On a different conception of respect -- call it the deliberative conception -- we respect our fellow citizen's moral and religious convictions by engaging or attending to them -- sometimes by challenging and contesting them, sometimes by listening and learning from them -- especially when those convictions bear on important political questions.'<sup>8</sup>

PL will not engage with real religion at all. It insists that religion be 'translated' into the thin discourse of 'public reason', for it to *be* of any consequence.<sup>9</sup> 'Political liberalism' *nilhilates* religion: all that it is prepared to call 'reasonable' religion is mere ceremony or epiphenomenon.<sup>10</sup> This can be easily seen by contrasting Rawls's emphasis on the forms of religion with a serious account of religion that understands its true nature. Rawls's follower Joshua Cohen writes, interpreting Rawls: 'if I have a religious outlook, then I will understand that this view assigns to me as adherent certain basic obligations such as to day and manner of worship.'<sup>11</sup> He, following Rawls, takes this to be fundamental to religion. Now contrast Leo Tolstoy's interpretation of Jesus's words: 'The Sabbath is a human institution. That man shall live in the spirit is more important than all religious ceremonies. // ...Men need not worship God in any particular place, but they must worship him in spirit and in act.'<sup>12</sup> The failure of liberals to understand the real nature of real religion is telling: it tells us that liberalism can only afford to tolerate the outward forms of religion, not its inner essence, and especially not that inner essence inasmuch as it seeks expression in life-changing and *world-*

<sup>8</sup> Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the limits of justice* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), 217.

<sup>9</sup> See the discussions of 'the proviso' IPPR 584 and 591-3. ('The proviso' states that religious discourse, to have any standing in 'public reason', must be translatable without residue into purely political discourse.) In my view, this actually distracts attention from what is pretty obviously the main reason why religious people typically actually *do* use 'public reason' (or something roughly resembling it), when they do: namely, so as to be in purely practical terms *persuasive towards those who do not necessarily share their (or any) religion*. (See also IPPR 592 -- this is the *only* place where, extremely briefly, Rawls admits the possible importance of the point I am making here.)

<sup>10</sup> In the sense that 'the proviso' renders religious discourse, doctrine etc. entirely *epiphenomenal* to 'public reason'. Literally so: religion must for Rawlsians be an epiphenomenon to whatever there is *in* it that is of use in -- is allowed in -- public reason.

<sup>11</sup> Joshua Cohen, 'For a democratic society,' in: Samuel Richard Freeman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), 104-105.

<sup>12</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *The Gospel in Brief* (Mineola: Dover, 2008 (1893), transl. Isabel Hapgood), 139.

changing action. Timothy P. Jackson has in a fine paper published in the *Journal of Religious Ethics* pointed this up, in reference to a founding source of Christianity itself:

‘Saint Paul observes in 1 *Corinthians* 14 2-5, “[O]ne who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God... On the other hand, he who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation... He who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues.” For the Christian to grant that she cannot normally advocate or vote her conscience in constitutional matters would be, ironically, to acquiesce to the political equivalent of speaking only in tongues.’<sup>13</sup>

Liberalism will not permit such conscientious advocacy. As we shall see, *all that liberalism is prepared to call ‘unreasonable’ or ‘subversive advocacy’ it is quite prepared ruthlessly to suppress*, the moment the latter shows any sign of threatening the neutrality (let alone the power or stability) of the liberal state or ‘civil society’.<sup>14</sup> In effect, Rawls considers any and all religion which will not allow itself to be entirely neutered to be *seditious*.

### **The later Rawls as politician (and rhetorician)**

I suspect that secular-minded readers may at this point be thinking, roughly, ‘This is all very well, but the bottom line is that religion is dangerous, or at least potentially so. When religious believers act on their beliefs, they generally do bad things. Look at those Christians who want to murder abortionists in America; or look at those Muslims who want to murder Americans; or at those Judaic Fundamentalists who want to murder or at least expel Muslims; religions must be brought to heel, and brought to respect the rules of a society that is not any longer founded on their precepts. Religion is inherently seditious, if it does not allow the liberal state to set limits to its powers, and respect those limits.’ To think along the lines of this invented quote is to think *precisely in the manner that Rawls in practice encourages*. For an unnoted but (I think) quite critically important part of Rawls’s political rhetoric, the rhetoric that smoothes the path of his later philosophy toward apparent-acceptability, and tends to shield from one’s perception the line of objection and critique that I laid out in the previous section, is this: While Rawls repeatedly cites positive examples of religious leaders/thinkers reasoning in ways that are compatible with public reason, *he virtually never cites examples of religious leaders/thinking reasoning in ways that are incompatible with public reason except examples that are calculated to scare*. In other words, Rawls’s invocation of ‘unreasonable’ religion is almost always of

---

<sup>13</sup> Timothy Jackson, ‘Love in a liberal society,’ *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Spring, 1994), 29-38, 36.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. *PL* xix: with regard to ‘unreasonable’ doctrines, ‘the problem is to contain them so that they do not undermine the unity and justice of society.’ See also ‘Constitutional Liberty and the concept of justice,’ his *Collected Papers*, 93 for Rawls’s licensing of the right -- indeed, the duty -- to suppress any ‘sect’ which actually poses a threat to liberalism. In *PL* 344, 346 and 348 Rawls argues in effect likewise that the religious etc. can engage in ‘subversive advocacy’ so long as they have no chance whatsoever of *success*. The moment one has any hope of threatening the liberal state, one’s fundamental constitutional rights before the law are in effect null and void.

religion that he has reason to believe that his audience -- mostly, Western liberal intellectuals -- will see as little better than 'bogeymen'. Rawls quite calculatedly portrays religion as inherently potentially seditious.

Here are two representative passages:

'Perhaps the doctrine of free faith developed because it is difficult, if not impossible, to believe in the *damnation* of those with whom we have, with trust and confidence, long and fruitfully cooperated in maintaining a just society.' (*PL*, xxvii, emphasis added)

'[C]omprehensive doctrines that cannot support...a democratic society are not reasonable. Their principles and ideals do not satisfy the criterion of reciprocity, and in various ways they fail to establish the equal basic liberties. *As examples, consider the many fundamentalist doctrines, the doctrine of the divine right of monarchs and the various forms of aristocracy, and, not to be overlooked, the many instances of autocracy and dictatorship.*' (IPRR 609; emphasis added)

With enemies like those, one needs friends: and there, prepared for action, is political liberalism, ready to fit the bill, seemingly one's best recourse to avoid these (indeed genuinely generally pretty dreadful) non-democratic options. The deck has hardly been evenly cut; Rawls has not mentioned, and he virtually never does mention, the possibility that there might be 'unreasonable' comprehensive doctrines that are not fundamentally undemocratic (Consider e.g. Quakerism), or that, even if they perhaps are, are nevertheless in other ways genuinely very attractive (Consider e.g. Tibetan Buddhism). Nor does he mention in quotes like these (with which his later work is replete) the possibility of 'unreasonable' religious doctrines that do not damn unbelievers -- and there are many such (e.g. the increasingly-influential 'Creation Spirituality' movement, which believes in *original blessing* as opposed to original sin). Rawls's rhetorical positioning of political liberalism as the only alternative to pretty patently undesirable forms of religious belief and undemocracy is, I submit, highly suspect.

Consider now some passages in which the same move is made, with regard to various more or less non-religious views or practices that are sure to strike Rawls's main/implied audience as self-evidently undesirable. Notice the way that Rawls positions liberalism as the only obvious alternative to these, and these as the only obvious alternatives to liberalism:

'The wars of [the 20th] century with their extreme violence and increasing destructiveness, culminating in the manic evil of the Holocaust, raise in an acute way the question whether political relations must be governed by power and coercion alone. If a reasonably just society that subordinates power to its aims is not possible and people are largely amoral, if not incurably cynical and self-centered, one might ask with Kant whether it is worthwhile for human beings to live on the earth? We must start with the assumption that a reasonably just political society is possible... *ToJ* and *PL* try to sketch what the more reasonable conceptions of justice for a democratic regime are and to present a candidate for the most reasonable.' (*PL* lxii)

No other options are considered, besides the most appalling tyranny on the one hand, and liberal governance on the other. There is no question of people being self-organizing (as in anarchism (compare for example the mode of life described by George Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia*) and in some kibbutzim in the past, for instance), and/or living on the basis (say) of love rather than justice. Rawls's political rhetoric, presenting a Manichean choice between the justice of a liberal regime on the one hand and the road to the Holocaust and the Gulag and '9/11' on the other, is subtly politically-manipulative -- and, once one has started to take its measure, unimpressive.

'Liberalism or barbarism', might very easily be Rawls's motto hereabouts. The possibility of a non-liberal non-barbarism is simply not raised. Rawls's rhetoric then is (not to put too fine a point on it) cheap: it is little more than a thinly-disguised economism combined with a scare-mongering attempt to drown out the voices, the possibility, of any and all alternatives to his vision of politics -- and in the name, God help us, of freedom and pluralism!

Lest it be thought that I am over-interpreting Rawls's flights of rhetoric, let me point out that at some key points in his discussion, Rawls is quite explicit about the 'Manichean' dimension of his thought. Speaking of the new historical circumstance of the Reformation, out of which experience liberalism was born, Rawls writes, 'What is new about [the clash between rival salvationist, creedal, and expansionist versions of Christianity in the Reformation] is that it introduces into people's conceptions of their good a transcendent element *not admitting of compromise*. This element forces *either* mortal conflict moderated only by circumstance and exhaustion, *or* equal liberty of conscience and freedom of thought. ... Political liberalism starts by taking to heart *the absolute depth of that irreconcilable...conflict*.' (PL xxviii, emphases added; compare also *ToJ* 208). I hope that it is evident that, (even) if one were to accept the conceptual possibility of Rawls's preferred option here -- i.e. if one buys into the possibility of liberal 'neutrality', the possibility of true freedom of conscience existing under liberalism -- then one should certainly consider the possibility that there may be other methods of faith, other rules of conflict, than those leading by a straight path to pure mortal combat.<sup>15</sup> If and when religion is seditious, it can sometimes be so *in ways that are actually desirable*. (The threat posed to a state by religiously motivated conscientious objection and civil disobedience, for instance, can be the

---

<sup>15</sup> One might, for instance, think that someone sorely impressed by the systematic evils of the 20th century could have saved some space at a moment like this in his text for one of the great systematic goods of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; namely, the development and mass application of *satyagraha*, the true, spiritual-political understanding of the method of Gandhian non-violence. But there is no space for such a possibility in Rawls's Manichean schema: he can only make alleged (and profoundly-traductive -- for argument as to why, see n.11 of my 'Refusing to hear the refuseniks,' *Practical Philosophy*, Vol. 10.1, November 2009, 56-63) sense of Gandhi as himself an exponent of 'public reason'. ...Once again, it seems that Rawls suffers from his narrow diet of examples: he seems only to be thinking of the 'religions of the book', the monotheisms, and largely of literalistic or fundamentalistic versions of those. This forgets that non-theisms and polytheisms across the world have almost as many adherents, *and* forgets the reasonable frequency, in history and today, even of monotheistic religions being tolerant of one another.

best thing that ever happened to the state and people in question: for more on this, see below.)

Or again, compare this passage: '[V]arious religious sects oppose the culture of the modern world and wish to lead their common life apart from its foreign influences.'<sup>16</sup> Well; *I* for one oppose the 'culture of the modern world', insofar as it is individualistic, exploitative, craven in its kow-towing to commerce, philistine, etc. But once more, the kind of positively-altered education system that someone like me would want to encourage be put in place, to help engender a better culture, does not get considered by Rawls:<sup>17</sup> only the negative case of the madrassas, etc.<sup>18</sup> Rawls presumes that his readers will have a negative image of and instinctive reaction against 'sects' which 'oppose the culture of the modern world.' This latter, I suggest, is a very telling presumption.

Rawls is best-known as a leading political philosopher. I am arguing -- and this is hardly an original thought -- that there is something very fishy about Rawls's producing a substantive (as opposed to a merely procedural) theory of justice<sup>19</sup> from out of a conceptual analysis.<sup>20</sup> I am arguing this here -- and this is rather more original -- *by means of paying close attention to 'hidden' dimensions of Rawls's treatment of religion*: specifically, to his implicit elimination of religion as a serious category of life, under liberalism. This shows Rawls as quite frequently more a mere politician than a statesman, let alone a sage or a philosopher. Some of Rawls's formulations are little more than glorified intellectual excuses for the inanities of the oxymoronic 'war on terror' that Ronald Reagan fought mainly via proxies around the world in the 1980s, and that even now under Barack Obama's 'enlightened' leadership is still being fought

---

<sup>16</sup> Rawls, 'The priority of the right and ideas of the good,' in: *Collected Papers*, 464. Compare also the case on 461-2: Rawls is looking for examples where 'the encouraging or discouraging of comprehensive doctrines' is permitted by political liberalism. But: No examples of encouragement are given. The kind of case of such doctrines being 'in direct conflict with the principles of justice' that Rawls goes on to give is 'illustrated by a conception of the good requiring the repression or degradation of certain persons on, say, racial, ethnic or perfectionist grounds, for example slavery in ancient Athens or in the antebellum South.' Again, a brace of prejudicial examples, hardly designed to elicit the potential sympathy of readers for the spectrum of comprehensive doctrines that would conflict with Rawlsian thinking.

<sup>17</sup> For an educational system that is 'prejudiced' in favour (e.g.) of 'perfectionist' or spiritual conceptions of the good is of course ruled out by liberal neutrality (see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose justice?, Which rationality?* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1988), 336f. for pertinent discussion); but such conceptions are *prima facie* pretty attractive, so Rawls in the main focuses on attacking bad religious schooling, instead. See the next section, for my thoughts on this.

<sup>18</sup> A very interesting 'test case' for liberal intolerance of religiously-based and possibly-life-enriching (I do not know enough about the religion and people in question to judge) education is provided by the treatment of the Amish in the U.S. over the last century, and in particular the great difficulty they have had in keeping their children out of (state) schooling. This case is explored dextrously by Sandel, in his 'Freedom of conscience or freedom of choice?' in: J.D. Hunter & Os Guinness (eds.), *Articles of faith, articles of peace* (Washington DC: Brookings Institute, 1990), 75-92; see also Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: OUP, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Which *Political Liberalism* remains, on Rawls's own account (see e.g. 421ff.): only it is no longer meant to be a *comprehensive* theory of justice (though, as may be becoming clear, I dispute that).

<sup>20</sup> Burton Dreben, 'On Rawls and Political Liberalism,' in: Freeman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, 322, also 338.

openly in places like Afghanistan and Somalia and Yemen and Iraq ... and that, of course is currently devastating our civil liberties ... and, ironically, pushing people in increasing numbers towards visions of religion (whether Christian or Islamic) that are not only seditious, but pernicious. Rawls's thought was *designed* as an apologia for the broad outlines of actually-existing liberalism. Perhaps then it isn't so surprising if the hidden dimensions of his rhetoric on religion reveal him to be in a certain sense (the sense just indicated) merely a politician.

### **The sharp repression of sedition; and its liberation**

One of the ways in which Rawls's liberalism privatises religion and makes its -- quite often desirable -- impact on the political sphere severely punishable, is through his (Rawls's) influential sharp division between 'conscientious objection' (private, not supposed to influence state policy) and 'civil disobedience' (public, political). This distinction has been *enormously* influential, including in courts of law. It makes the position of (e.g.) Quakers such as myself impossible. It also makes the position of the (mostly Zionist, Judaist) 'Courage to Refuse' *refuseniks* in Israel impossible. Quite literally so, in the latter case: Rawls's stance has been substantively influential in Israel as a tool with which the Right has argued successfully against any judicial viability in the stance of the *refuseniks*. This is the political reality of how Rawls's prohibition on religion having a public face works: The Israeli Supreme Court has ruled against 'selective' conscientious objection (objection to serving in Israel's Occupation of Palestine), or conscientious objection that is also civil disobedience, leaning heavily on Rawls's distinction, in the process.<sup>21</sup>

Liberalism can tolerate religions only if they either strip themselves of 'intrinsic' aspects (i.e. are no longer truly a way of life, and are therefore in the end of no deep significance for their practitioners), or if their 'intrinsic' aspects are basically unthreatening to liberalism (e.g. if they preach simply 'withdrawal' from the public world -- to the (limited) extent permitted by law!). If one believes that true religion, true spirituality, is necessarily *engaged*, then one will accept neither of these. Again, that goes just as much for many (I would claim) desperately-needed and positive life-affirming religions and spiritualities -- that Rawls says virtually nothing at all about<sup>22</sup> -- such as Zen or engaged Buddhisms and Quakerism, as it does for the religious fundamentalisms that Rawls scares his readers by repeatedly invoking seemingly as the only alternative to his 'impartial' approach.

By my lights, however, liberalism itself, far from being impartial, is actually in an important sense *itself* tacitly a religion. Its claim to impartiality just does not stack up. It is important to note that this is not only true, as noted above, of the early Rawls; the later Rawls's merely 'political' liberalism does NOT escape

---

<sup>21</sup> For references, see e.g. the Introduction to and the papers by Sagi and Sapira in the special issue of the *Israel Law Review* on 'Refusals to serve: Political dissent in the Israel Defence Forces,' 36:3 (Fall 2002). And for detail, see again my 'Refusing to hear the refuseniks,' in *Practical Philosophy*.

<sup>22</sup> Except for his remarkably negative verdict of Quaker's potential place in politics, in: *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1999); especially 105.

these charges. In the end,<sup>23</sup> the later Rawls's use of the term 'unreasonable' to describe comprehensive doctrines that refuse to go along with the limits of political liberalism is simply question-begging. Rawls cannot offer any secure grounds for it that do not commit him implicitly to offering political liberalism *as itself a 'comprehensive doctrine'*, a doctrine affecting all aspects of life, and not excluding any aspects of life from being within its regulative grasp. That is why I characterize political liberalism as tacitly a 'secular' *fundamentalism* (or a 'secular fideism', to use MacIntyre's term<sup>24</sup>). Its pseudo-non-religious character masks its absolutely imperial reach, its *comprehensive* (re-)conception of the totality of human life (including a severe rupturing between 'public' and 'private' aspects of life). Liberalism's claim to neutrality, which has made liberal political philosophy appear as if it is the only game in town in the contemporary English-speaking academic world, is an ideological charade, masking its now fully-global ambition for spiritual and political dominance.<sup>25</sup> I therefore reject liberalism as a deeply-dangerous (as well as self-contradictory) political philosophy. And I say that, at the same time as being an avid believer in most substantive civil liberties (liberties which our 'leading' Western 'liberal' states are currently discarding with remarkable speed and near-alacrity, and which are being best defended, it seems to me, by the very radical non-violent direct-action etc. groups which are at best barely tolerated, in the 'liberal democratic' polity), in real freedom of expression and a well-informed citizenry (incompatible with a capitalist 'free' press), in a genuine deliberative and participative democracy (e.g. through participatory budgeting, rather than a merely formal freedom to vote), and in equality (rather than the *inequality* manifested in 'the difference principle'). One does not have to endorse liberal principles of political philosophy, in order to believe in these things. In fact, it might even be that there is little chance of these things being preserved or ever achieved, unless we discard the un-self-aware fundamentalism, the deepset secular religion that is liberalism, and embrace instead a frankly non-'neutral', spiritually-rich, green and localised vision for humankind<sup>26</sup> a vision on which the siren call of religious fundamentalism can be resisted, not, except *in true extremis* through being intolerated,<sup>27</sup> but through the explicit putting forth

<sup>23</sup> As laid out in S. Mulhall & A. Swift's (liberal-sympathetic) *Liberals and communitarians* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 237-245. See also the devastating objections along similar lines in Section III of Sandel, 'Review Essay: "Political Liberalism",' *Harvard Law Review* 107 (1994), 1765-94.

<sup>24</sup> See MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> On which, see Tom Young's powerful "A project to be realised": Global liberalism and contemporary Africa,' *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 24:3 (1995), 527-546.

<sup>26</sup> In other words, I envision my non-liberal (yet deeply pro-most-civil-liberties) vision being achievable through a re-localisation of the world, through its being the basis of inter-dependent and yet semi-autonomous *communities* of faith and practice.

<sup>27</sup> Rawls suggests (IPPR, 589) that religions which do not accept the fact of reasonable pluralism would impose their own religious doctrine upon all, as 'the sole admissible faith', should they fully gain their way. But this does not follow at all, and is again I suspect a scare-tactic designed to prevent the reader from realising the possibility of an 'evangelical' and non-pluralistic faith that nonetheless does not wish to *impose* its doctrines upon all. For instance, one might believe that to impose one's faith on others was unethical (or even irreligious); or simply ineffective; or both. Rawls does not consider the possibility, important in relation to the history of Quakerism for instance, and similarly in relation to various other Protestant or post-Christian sects that believe in the crucialness of actually being *convinced*, that a religion might consider itself the true comprehensive doctrine, which all should uphold, and yet refrain from imposing its doctrine upon

of a rival conception of the human good, that might actually win the battle for the hearts and souls and minds of the peoples of the Earth, in the ‘marketplace of ideas’... And, if possible, through providing such a conception with substantial state funding, with a key role in the education system...<sup>28</sup> and with a number of other things that liberalism would deny it... For this is the ultimate political objection against liberalism’s opposition to any religion that is not ‘reasonable’ enough to cede political victory to liberalism: that liberalism *makes it more difficult* for comprehensive (religious, spiritual, ethical, philosophical) visions that disagree with its own to get any political traction in society, to get their visions actually implemented by the state or by localities.

A final objection to my argument might however be mooted on liberalism’s behalf. *Must* Rawlsian liberalism object to all these things? Doesn’t Rawls’s system at least tolerate such thinking, after all? Isn’t this made explicit, in *Rawls’s own objections to the idea of a liberal democracy having in place a seditious libel law?*

Here is Rawls’s explicit discussion of the matter. There must be, he says,

‘...no such thing as the crime of seditious libel; ...no prior constraints on freedom of the press, except for special cases; and the advocacy of revolutionary and subversive doctrines [must be] fully protected. // ...Thus, as Kalven has said, a free society is one in which we cannot defame the government; there is no such offence:

“The absence of seditious libel as a crime is the true pragmatic test of freedom of speech. This I would argue is what free speech is about. Any society in which seditious libel is a crime is, no matter what its other features, not a free society.” (PL 342).

This sounds all reasonably well and good. It is surely a good thing that the Sedition Act in the U.S. lapsed in 1801, and indeed was declared unconstitutional in 1964. But does anyone seriously believe that there is no danger, in the United States or Britain or Australia or other liberal democracies, at the present time, of activities that are not actually seditious nevertheless being treated precisely as being so (as being ‘terrorist’)? The answer is entirely obvious; speaking as someone who has been repeatedly threatened with arrest, in London, under the Terrorism Act, merely for engaging in such ‘seditious’ acts as waving a peace banner outside Buckingham Palace or Downing Street, the very question seems to me almost an obscene one for anyone living today to ask. The more interesting, live question, about whether for instance acts *properly* judged seditious, in a ‘liberal democracy’ accessory to the supreme war-crime, the crime of aggression (I am referring to the 2003 attack on Iraq), should be *protected* in some way (as for instance religiously-motivated conscientious objection, to some

---

others even when having the opportunity of doing so (and refrain even from evangelizing), preferring persuasion and conversion in good faith. I believe strongly in Non-Violent Communication, a practice attractive to Quakers, Gandhians, etc., which refuses to impose by force upon others even in one’s words. This belief is itself quasi-religious, and partly purely pragmatic.

<sup>28</sup> How should we bring up our children? To love one another, to meditate, to practice non-violence, to have deep and meaningful spiritual lives... none of this brooks ‘neutrality’. Compare and contrast Rawls, ‘The priority of the right and ideas of the good,’ in: *Collected Papers*, 464.

degree at least, is), does not even get onto Rawls's radar. Crucially for our present purposes, the reason why is this: we cannot take seriously Rawls's own claim not to wish to prohibit sedition. For, as hinted earlier in this paper, any rounded reading of Rawls's work cannot fail to illuminate the blunt fact that, while speech *without consequences* is protected by Rawls, speech with consequences, and acts (with consequences) are not. In other words, the situation here is *precisely* the same as it is with Rawls's 'protection' of religion: 'seditious libel' is OK'd by Rawls just insofar as it is *without effect*, or (in effect) 'private'. As soon as it conceivably appears to threaten the state -- i.e. as soon as it has any of precisely the effects it wishes to have, rather than merely being so much hot air! --, it is sharply, ruthlessly, suppressed.

So, just two pages after his grandstanding against the very *idea* of there being a crime of sedition, Rawls (*PL* 344) starts to take a firm stand against the need to tolerate what he calls 'subversive advocacy'. More tellingly still, Rawls (*PL* 346) writes that 'resistance and revolution' pose a problem that *cannot even arise* in a 'well-ordered society'. This, of course, is just the ultimate excuse that 'liberal democracies' are looking for: there can be no excuse for the kind of activity engaged in by a King, or a Gandhi, in societies such as our's, because '*by definition the problem* [calling for a mass conscientious objection to state violence, a mass expression of conscience, that, far from being merely private, is a "subversive" collective/public conscientious objection that wants to *win*] *does not arise*.' This is a chilling, quasi-totalitarian prohibition. Rawls's liberal state says: We are virtuous; therefore there cannot be any question of any action or speech against our ruling philosophy being genuinely tolerated. This is the kind of thing one expects from Hegel, or from Whigs, or from Tony Blair – perhaps finding liberals in their company is not as surprising as one would have wished it to be.

Finally, Rawls closes the discussion (*PL* 348) by making crystal clear the upshot. He says that the line as to what is protected political speech should be drawn 'at subversive advocacy when it is both directed to inciting imminent and unlawful use of force and likely to achieve this result.' In short: you are allowed to *try* to subversively advocate, only until you have started to have any chance of actually succeeding in any such advocacy, to even the slightest degree. Those insisting on challenging their government's policies, when those policies are internationally illegal or profoundly immoral, by means of non-violent force are, *especially* if religiously/spiritually-motivated, and *especially* if they have any chance at all of succeeding, beyond the law, in Rawls's 'liberal' 'utopia'. They are guilty, in all but name, of sedition, and can be punished accordingly.

The time is ripe to unmask and reject root and branch this disgraceful result of 'liberalism'; and to start to substitute in its place a plan for how to *liberate* 'sedition': To turn the activity of those who would transform our contemporary liberal democracies for the better, as a result of their conviction, into something welcomed or at least permitted by the societies in question. And to stop pretending, though a dangerous political rhetoric, that 'liberalism' is our only bulwark against 'terror', or 'barbarism'. For, by contrast: even behaviour that actually is seditious, let alone much behaviour which is not, but which is still

prohibited by 'tolerant' liberalism, is likely to be our only bulwark against the imperialism, the terrorism, of liberalism itself.

On his recent lecture tour of the UK, Tariq Ali told audiences that the sacred has been tried for thousands of years, and it has failed us. My claim here is by contrast that the sacred has over the last few hundred years increasingly been dispensed with; we have given up trying it. Even where it has not been dispensed with, and it appears vibrant, it is under grave threat from capitalism and liberalism. It is time that we investigated its potential rewards, including in the sphere of politics, once more. It may in fact be the only bulwark now between us and barbarism, and between us and ecocide.

### Conclusions

Rawls is by all accounts the leading philosopher of liberalism. The argument that this essay has made therefore constitutes a fundamental challenge to philosophical and political liberalism, and to all philosophies that are in practice attracted at least by its 'tolerant' secularism. As Susan Mendus puts it, the value of toleration is allegedly explored and buttressed very powerfully by 'the theory of liberal neutrality whose most famous exponent is John Rawls. Rawls takes as given the fact that there are differences between people which give rise to hostility, and he argues that a just political order will be one in which, while acknowledging these differences, takes no side in disputes between them. The liberal state will (as far as possible) remain neutral between Christians and Jews, Jews and Sikhs, Sikhs and Muslims, Muslims and atheists. Each group will be allowed to practise its own religion within the liberal state, but the state itself will not endorse any particular religious doctrine.'<sup>29</sup> I believe that this correctly indicates the importance of the stance towards religion in Rawlsian liberalism, and that the failure of the liberal state *actually* to allow religious people to *practise* their own religion, except in the sense of practising meaningless ceremonies and consequence-less inner speech, the failure I have set out in this essay, indicates the gravity of the failure of Rawlsian liberalism to achieve neutrality -- or, alternatively put, the undesirableness of what such 'neutrality' actually amounts to.

The public vs. private distinction as Rawls enforces it, his use of his 'proviso' to determine the secular translatability of any religious claims intended to have any impact outside a purely privatized domain, is not a way of tolerating real religion. Liberal claims to neutrality, with regard to ultimate values, beliefs and practices, are not neutral at all, but rather function to exclude religious reason from public discourse in a manner that reveals a hidden logic of totalitarianism or fundamentalism beneath the liberal veil of 'tolerance'. As Talal Asad for instance has powerfully argued,<sup>30</sup> secular liberalism tacitly positions religion as a merely

---

<sup>29</sup> 'My brother's keeper: the politics of intolerance,' in: Susan Mendus (ed.), *The Politics of Toleration* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U. Press, 1999).

<sup>30</sup> See especially Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003). (Cf. also the work of Charles Taylor, Saba Mahmood and A.C. Conyers.) It might be thought that my work is unamenable to Asad's, in that his work seems more critical of the very *category* of religion than is mine. But this would be a misunderstanding (of him). As Ivan Strenski argues, *Why politics*

‘symbolical’ phenomenon rather than as a living self-explaining practice, and thus rules out *a priori* any attempt to make sense of what religious practitioners do on their own terms.<sup>31</sup> What liberalism cannot even understand, it positions itself in an imperial relationship toward...

Here once again Jackson’s critique is powerful and telling. He writes:

‘I am all for restraint of civic conversation for the sake of mutual respect and public legitimacy, but arguments for such restraint (for what Rawls calls “the duty of civility”...) cut both ways. If secular citizens insist that they cannot recognize religious claims on social institutions as just..., the same may be said by theists about remorselessly materialistic judgements. The obvious thing to say about the Rawlsian insistence that public reason exclude religious beliefs is that it is unfair to believers. The language of secular humanism can be just as threatening to the faithful as biblical justifications are to nonbelievers... So why should theists alone demur? Why should prophetic voices alone be muzzled? I see no satisfactory Rawlsian answer to this. A higher-order impartiality that would prescind entirely from controversial conceptions of the good and of truth...is either vacuous or is a deceptive way of privileging a particular (often atheistic) agenda.’<sup>32</sup>

The ‘proviso’ is by no means as neutral as it appears. It is resolutely one-sided. It evacuates culture of the distinctiveness of religion, except as a private merely ritualistic ritual.

Culture abhors a vacuum. Fundamentalisms will trickle or flood into the space left permanently empty by liberalism, the gap it strictly maintains where old-time religion was and where a richly nourishing engaged spirituality might be. ... Unless liberalism itself is evicted. And so: If one thinks that the claims of community, non-violence and ecology, for well-being, equity and survival, are essential, and if one believes in such engaged spiritualities, and in their potential to transform the world (if they are permitted to flourish and perhaps to ‘take power’), then one must reject what I have called liberalism’s rejection of any genuine freedom of religion. One must take the risk of forbidding oneself the easy ‘liberal’ (sic.) proscription of fundamentalisms, and embrace instead the possibility that there is indeed one true religion. One must hope that that

---

*can’t be freed from religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 43f, Asad’s actual target of criticism is the typical liberal Western conceptualisation of religion: i.e. his target of criticism is very similar to mine. He seeks to undermine an over-intellectualised, under-embodied, emotionally-divested version of religion in which private beliefs (as opposed to public practices) are all that matters – he suggests that this version may be distinctively Protestant in its prejudices, which I think is right, and chimes with Rawls’s historical heritage in relation to the tolerance that gradually emerged from the European wars of religion. For textual evidence, see especially Sabah Mahmood’s interview with him ‘Modern power and the reconfiguration of religious traditions,’ *SEHR* 5:1 (27 Feb. 1996), 1-15, and his ‘Reflections on Laicite and the Public Sphere,’ *Items and Issues* 5:3, 1-11.

<sup>31</sup> For my own effort to understand the latter, see Phil Hutchinson, Rupert Read & Wes Sharrock, *There is no such thing as a social science* (London: Ashgate, 2008). This Winchian work attempts to clear the ground in order to make it possible to see how human practices (including, focally, religious and ‘magical’ practices) are only *obscured* by the lens of ‘social science’, a lens vital to the endeavour of liberalism in general and of Rawlsianism in particular. For Rawls assumes that denizens of the original position will know the ‘truths’ of social science, which (as Winch showed) is resolutely hostile to religion, determined to ‘understand’ it through a purely secular set of categories.

<sup>32</sup> Jackson, ‘Love in a Liberal Society,’ 34.

religion is a religion of compassionate action, of love, of fellowship, of peace -- not of hate; *nor* of a fake 'neutrality'. One must work for the republic of such religion, such true spirituality, to be established on Earth.

Does this sound unattractively 'fundamentalist'? But *liberalism* is, I believe, in a sense the most extreme fundamentalism of them all: in that, in the act of proclaiming itself to be a merely neutral arbiter, it bans all rival views from having any substantive role in society, and castigates as fundamentalist and dangerously 'subversive' the very lines of thought and action -- e.g. those that I have explicitly recommended, in this paper -- that have the best chance of yielding a good fulfilling life for human beings, a life that can be sustained. What liberalism does to real religion is the *model* of what liberalism does everywhere: it treats substantive claims (e.g. claims as to the nature of the good for humans, or indeed of the Good *simpliciter*) as mere 'interests', and tolerates them, as such, as mere private opinions or more-or-less meaningless rituals. But that is not how the claims (ethical, spiritual, religious etc.) were *intended*. Liberalism forbids religion from being (considered as) central to human identity, and thus proscribes in advance for instance the important possibility that we might find *a shared core* to (some, perhaps nearly all) different religions, a shared core religion-spirituality of love and compassionate action. This, that John Dewey<sup>33</sup> called *a common faith*, a faith that goes beyond and behind the particular religious vernaculars that different religions employ,<sup>34</sup> and that explicitly champions a relatively-thick conception of the good, is far more likely, I submit, to provide a genuine glue for modern society than is the weak fare -- the thin gruel -- of 'public reason'.<sup>35</sup> This is an extremely important point, and one that

---

<sup>33</sup> *Political Liberalism*, the holy book of the cult of later Rawls, is in fact the fourth John Dewey Lecture in Philosophy. It is a matter of regret that Rawls did not see fit to learn from his great 'liberal' predecessor that perhaps there might be a common core to the religions that Rawls is always emphasizing the differences between. There is no reference to Dewey anywhere in the body of *PL*. On another occasion, I hope to consider whether Deweyan radical liberalism is in part at least invulnerable to the criticisms I make here of contemporary -- Rawlsian etc. -- liberalism.

<sup>34</sup> The idea that there is such a thing as a common faith which we are all striving for, or that is present in all religions, is a very influential idea among most religions, though you would not know it from liberal discussions that emphasize intolerance and the difficult task of tolerance amidst pluralism. The idea is strongly present in Islam, for instance, in the veneration of the Judaic and Christian prophets. The idea is *constitutive* of the Bah'ai faith. It is arguably equally important among explicitly engaged spiritualities (most strikingly, perhaps, in the recent work of Thich Nhat Hanh). Here for instance is a central maxim of contemporary engaged Buddhist leader Christopher Titmuss: 'Truth expresses itself as authentic and dedicated action. It cuts through the harmful and breaks with the painful past. There is one ethic -- to stay within the power of Truth.' (From: 'Ten points to remember for those who work for peace and justice,' *Indra's Net : The journal of the network of Engaged Buddhists* 37 (Autumn 2005), 7). The possibility of real ecumenism, I submit, is that Truth cuts across the divide between ostensibly different faiths. The real opportunity offered by the idea of a common faith, I believe, is not a lowest common denominator, but *a highest truth toward which all faiths are striving*. (As it were, such a common faith needs to be a highest common factor or multiple rather than a lowest common denominator...) The problem with 'political liberalism' is its determined (though self-serving, because not applied to itself) abstention from all such claims to truth.

<sup>35</sup> Compare and contrast IPPR, 592 (and 586, 607), which is a discussion of Rawls's 'proviso'. When the proviso is satisfied, is it so because what is in common is political, is a deliberation of political liberalism through public reason? Or again, is it rather that what can be satisfied by various faiths according to the proviso (or at least: what can be more or less shoehorned into the proviso) is the substance of a common

Rawls nowhere considers: perhaps a shared *religion* (which as yet perhaps lacks a name) rather than a shared political conception ('public reason') is attainable, and necessary.

Such a vision of religion is perhaps seditious to the core, from a liberal point of view. If so, then so be it; and I would then be proud to accept the label.

So: I recommend a re-engagement with religion, with engaged religions and spiritualities that may well offer much more chance literally of salvation for this world than any purely-secular doctrine. Perhaps some readers are still at this point thinking that we (in the West as a whole) are where we are today because of brave historical anti-clericalism, and that that should not be too swiftly abandoned. Well: Yes indeed, such anti-clericalism has of course had *some* good results. But whenever anyone says anything along the lines of 'We in the West are where we are today because of historical anti-clericalism', we ought also to reply: And where are we today?: Up a creek. In societies that are either recoiling into a vicious fundamentalism, or gradually disintegrating altogether (or both).<sup>36</sup> Either way, in decadent societies that are destroying the very air we breathe. In which nothing is sacred except economic growth, the result of that anti-clericalism, and now (since about the last 50 years, at least) an almost unmitigatable disaster when considered on a worldwide scale.

Yes, anti-clericalism has brought us to where we are today: a declining culture, bereft of values, and heading rapidly towards complete self-destruction. Rawlsian political liberalism is, I have argued, a severe form of tacit anti-clericalism, a profoundly-anti-religious *fundamentalism*. Rawls extrapolates the growth of religious tolerance to a society where we do not seek to put our society on the footing of one comprehensive founding conception, but tolerate all such conceptions provided only that they tolerate the liberalism of our society. This political liberalism is however tacitly a comprehensive conception; and, worse still, it connotes a society in which toleration has turned to indifference. Markets breed indifference, obviously; but so, eventually, do religious individualism<sup>37</sup> and the 'democracy in religions' first observed by De Tocqueville. And all these are supported by liberalism. In contrast, we need to start to *de-indifference* our world. We need to seek truths that can re-unite us, that can revive community, not a mere glorified alleged *modus vivendi* that keeps us separate in our private worlds, while the public world declines to ruin.

---

*faith?* Is the appearance of the possibility of various religions being able (as 'reasonable political conceptions') to satisfy the proviso and thus be tolerated by political liberalism actually a deeply-misleading one, a combination of the purely pragmatic tendency of religious leaders often to use non-religious language (so as to convince others who do not share their faith), and the deeply-significant tendency of many religions and spiritualities (not all!) to agree on some key things as a consequence of their precisely sharing a substantive conception of what the good for human beings is, and of what the most important parts and meanings of life are?

<sup>36</sup> See for instance Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> See e.g. Stephen Marglin, *The dismal science: How thinking like an economist undermines community* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2008), 59, 64.

Having a state-sponsored conception of the good is unavoidable. The only question is whether it is to be a nasty type of Fundamentalist conception, or a tacitly-fundamentalist Rawlsian liberal conception – or something else. Rawlsian liberalism suborns religion, making a new positive spiritual start for the world impossible. If such a new start constitutes the human race's only hope, then it is a risk worth taking that *we might* instead end up in a nasty theocracy. In a Rawlsian world, cultural disintegration (already recognised tacitly in Rawls's later work) will proceed, and will only end with a mostly uninhabitable world ruled by warlords, and so on.

The way beyond the clash of fundamentalisms, theocracy vs. liberalism, lies through *taking seriously* the claims of life-affirming, ecologically-serious etc. religions and engaged spiritualities that liberal rhetoric has to date blinded and deafened us to. Perhaps, as the later Heidegger would have it, only a religion can save us now. Or rather, and more specifically: only a politically-engaged spirituality. One that draws together the claims to truth and the hopes (and fears) of the religions and spiritualities and ethics that perhaps yield a common faith that we can yet open our ears and eyes to, perhaps in time.