

Editorial

# Introduction: Political Theology, or the Formations of Pluralism

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The need for political theology to refine its scope, and—ultimately—to arrive at a place where it might enjoy full ownership over its public voice, grows more urgent by the moment in our fraught globalized climate. Academic theology need not be relegated to debates about doctrine carried out within the walls of the church, parish, or temple. How could it stay there anyway? Lay theology is, and legitimately can be, invoked in the public domain, where a variety of moral vocabularies are regularly invoked. We inhabit a plural age, in which some even argue the endless spectrum of perspectives which operate in most liberal democracies yields to an intensified and open-ended democracy, styled as hyper-pluralism (religious, spiritual, secular, agnostic and other outlooks all seek validation).<sup>1</sup> There can be no single moral or metaphysical “master” language that governs and subdues all others. In this diverse field of debate, citizens articulate their concerns in public according to a plurality of moral and religious viewpoints.

Pluralism, stated directly, is a *fait accompli*.<sup>2</sup> The question remains not so much “if” theology should be public, as “how” it should develop its voice; how it should become more mature and more precisely calibrated to its own unique idiomatic function in public debate. If attentive to the process by which it enunciates its message, political theology can illuminate moral questions not only for members who belong to the particular religious community in question, but also offer up clear and compelling moral frameworks for analysis of flashpoints that unfold in the public domain, from abortion, to the ecological crisis, to gun control, to homelessness. Essays in the tradition of practical theology and ethics are two compelling manuscripts in the Special Issue: “The Bergoglian Principles: Pope Francis’ Dialectical Approach to Political Theology,” and the environmentally-conscious, “Re-enchanting Political Theology.”

It should be obvious that political theology, however difficult it is to define, challenges the common-enough presumption that public issues and policy debate should be carried out in a neutral or secular language, as if religious citizens simply translate their thick theological vocabulary into a neutral, value-free secular one. In contrast, this Special Issue wishes to recognize the complex interweave of selfhood and language. What lay this Special Issue is the thesis that personal identity involves several components (religious, moral, cultural, linguistic, social, political) whose mosaic-like constitution in “me” is interlocked and mutually engaged. Hence the assumption that there is a single “neutral” public language thereby (falsely) treats personal identity as essentially monochromatic. How could it be plausible to imagine that each of us is at heart a kind of secular or neutral entity? An affirmative response to this question would, by the same token, be committed to the claim that religious identity or theological outlooks appear, then, to represent a derivative or add-on, a mere accident or outer layer that may well be removed, like a rain coat once I set foot indoors (without affecting the substance of who I am). Should my religious identity inconvenience public debate, does

<sup>1</sup> For more on this, see (Ferrara 2014).

<sup>2</sup> I have argued this elsewhere, (Rivera 2019).

it follow that I can simply remove that “outer layer” of my identity? A thoughtful rejoinder, and perhaps negative answer, can be found in part in the two essays in the Special Issue, “Humbling Discourse: Why Interfaith Dialogue, Religious Pluralism, Liberation Theology, and Secular Humanism are Needed for a Robust Public Square,” and the more philosophically disposed article, “Habermas, Taylor, and Connolly on Secularism, Pluralism, and the Post-Secular Public Sphere.”

Martha Nussbaum, just to take one contemporary example, offers a consideration of the public role of religion that drifts in this unfortunate direction of “neutral” reason. Typically sober and thoughtful (and brilliant), and certainly open to religious discourse in many published works, Nussbaum is clearly apprehensive of the emotional register of religion and theological vocabularies in her book *Political Emotions*. She thinks that government officials and law courts must “avoid suggesting that political norms grow out of one religious or secular view of life rather than another. The dangers of sectarianism and inadvertent establishment are particularly great when we are thinking about emotions, because emotions respond to memory, and memory is often linked to religious rituals and the habits of mind these form.” An equally strong statement is found a few pages later: “the political culture of emotion should not support itself by drawing on theological or metaphysical traditions.”<sup>3</sup> The ten essays composed here in the Special Issue generally challenge this dualist anthropology, which assumes every citizen could be split in half between a “stoic self liberated of theological tradition” and a “religious self laden with sectarian emotion.”

I appreciate Nussbaum’s assessment that government officials and courts cannot rely on theological justification for public policy; yet, how can any religious citizen transcend emotions bound up with a heartfelt spiritual practice? If, by her canons of thought (with which I agree) that emotion is often linked to memory and the embodied rituals the install habits of mind in the memory, then Nussbaum is asking citizens to bracket or “forget” a fundamental component of identity formation (for many). How is this even possible at the level of concrete practice? Without manuals that teach radical detachment from one’s one particular moral lifeworld and theological language (or tradition, to use her language), then citizens will have a difficult time separating out political norms from the theological traditions that lend those norms robust support.

Again, my position does not imply that I advocate for theocracy or theo-politics which uses sacred texts or theological authority as a conversation stopper in public dialogue. The point I wish to advance here can be articulated in the first-person parlance of a religious practitioner: as a religious citizen, I say that “I am a Christian,” not simply that “I am,” whereby at later junctures in my life narrative when it is convenient I may say that I can operate according to the field of emotions tied to Christianity. I do not “have” Christianity but rather I “am” a Christian (or Muslim, or Hindu, etc.). Even if I accept (which I do) the Augustinian notion that there is a time of pluralism known as the *saeculum*, it should not follow that the *saeculum* requires I leave behind the body of Christ. In fact, the article “An Augustinian Meditation on the *Saeculum*” argues that full participation in the body of Christ enables the Christian to affirm the ambiguity of the time of pluralism.

If religious citizens cannot divorce the “religious” or “spiritual” aspect of their identity from the multi-layered composition in which they subsist, then the question remains: how is religious citizenship at once (i) authentic to its religious values informed by sacred texts and ritual practice and (ii) faithful to liberal rights like the freedom of conscience, freedom religion, and, ultimately, pluralism? As John Rawls would ask, how can a religious citizen become reconciled to, rather than regret, pluralism?

Of course, Rawls (to whom Nussbaum is indebted) would have proposed overlapping consensus as one principled pragmatic strategy, by which a Christian or a Jew or a Muslim could maintain religious integrity and afford simultaneously to support a liberal regime. I can agree with the political polity of political liberalism, even if I do so from within the logic of my own faith tradition, or so Rawls would claim. A secular humanist, Protestant Christian, and Hindu can each—from within their differing

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<sup>3</sup> (Nussbaum 2013).

frameworks of moral reasoning—find a way to support the same public institution; namely *liberal democracy*. We agree on the structure of politics, but we do so for different reasons. I have discussed this elsewhere in some detail, and how it may facilitate public dialogue on controversial public policy talking points.<sup>4</sup> Political liberalism, the point remains to be reinforced here, does not obey the dictates of any single metaphysical or religious worldview, but can be supported from multiple points of view, including religious ones. Only comprehensive or perfectionist liberalism would relegate religion to the role of bystander who must stay away from politics. One contribution is inclined to advance this interpretation of liberalism, though in a thoughtful Levinasian tone, inflected in Niebuhrian accents: “When Liberalism is Not Enough: Political Theology after Reinhold Niebuhr and Emmanuel Levinas.”

Certainly, as I argue in my contribution, “The ‘Original Position’ as Public Performance: Liberalism, Pluralism, and Asceticism,” Christians can expand their identity to make room for other perspectives, without implying that their Christian character will be compromised, or worse, forgotten (bracketed). While not uncritical of Rawls’ device of representation—the famed original position—I do support a particular interpretation of it, what I call a “thin” veil of ignorance a religious citizen may apply in public debate. The article “Pluralism and the Roots of Social Conflict: Rethinking Rawls” is strongly critical of Rawls on this score. The two essays may be read in conjunction with each other.

The fact that we cannot leave behind our rich theological lifeworld with its attendant thick vocabularies, and ritual practices, is given even more precise expression in two other essays in the Special Issue, one from a Roman Catholic point of view and the other from a Protestant frame of reference. The article “The Church in a Pluralistic World: The Public Vision of *Ressourcement*,” engages with what is perhaps the most dynamic theological movement in twentieth-century Catholicism, focusing especially on figures like Yves Congar and Marie-Dominique Chenu, not least Henri de Lubac. This deeply historical study can be read as a complement to “Protestant Political Theology and Pluralism: From a Politics of Refusal to a Tending and Organizing for Common Goods.” These essays, and the Special Issue as a whole, overcome the legacy of Rousseau’s scathing critique of Christian public inactivity during his day, when he writes, Christians are “concerned solely with heavenly things; the Christian country is not of this world.”<sup>5</sup> Both Catholic and Protestant perspectives fuse here in the thesis that the Christian church, broadly conceived, can represent a beacon of hope and justice, and thus enact (for its part) the common good, a public liturgy that celebrates difference, and therefore, pluralism.

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<sup>4</sup> (Rivera 2018).

<sup>5</sup> (Rousseau 1994).