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## Review

# Faith in politics: Religion and liberal Democracy

Bryan T. McGraw

Cambridge University Press, New York, 2010, ix + 320pp.,

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## The disenchantment of secular discourse

Steven D. Smith

Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2010, 285pp.,

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Bryan McGraw and Steven D. Smith – the first in a work of exhaustive scholarship, the second in a more essayistic critique – both argue that religious claims should be more accommodated in public life than they currently are. Both insist that secular fears of imperious fundamentalism are spurious. McGraw begins with the admirable promise that he is going to look at ‘the empirical evidence regarding religion’s *actual* impact on democratic life’ (21) rather than just discussing faith in the abstract. He both does and does not deliver on this promise. He marshals impressive research about the history and behavior of denominational political parties in four European countries (Germany, Austria, Belgium and The Netherlands) between the last third of the nineteenth century and World War II, who ‘constructed powerfully integrated sub-cultural communities ... “alternative civil societies” organized entirely around religious identity and belief’ (46). These parties tell a story of ‘non-theocratic integrationists who can plausibly avoid ... confla[ing] the world of faith and politics without entirely separating them either’ (20–21), a category of religious believer McGraw alleges could strengthen contemporary American democracy, and a group he finds unfairly excluded by the liberal-secular consensus.

The material on these parties is interesting, and thoroughly researched, but it does not read as particularly dispositive regarding the questions at hand. McGraw admits his case studies do not perfectly support his argument, which is honorable: in Belgium and Holland, the religious parties strengthened democracy after World War I, but in Austria and Germany they abandoned democratic politics and often embraced fascism. Our colleagues across the hall

in political science would probably call this a small sample size leading to an ambivalent (at best) conclusion. What's more, it is never entirely clear how our evaluation of these parties' behavior should bear on the material in the rest of the book, the vast majority of which is dedicated to anatomizing and critiquing positions taken by academics on what are essentially contemporary American controversies.

McGraw later affirms the United States, anomalousness as to religiosity within the advanced countries (114). Is the idea that Europe's denominational parties then are similar to American religion-based political movements now? The equivalence may be justified, but it is simply assumed. (Would a serious crisis in American society bring about analogies to the Dutch case or the Weimar case? How could we guess?) Alternatively, the idea may be that American evangelicals would play a more constructive and less divisive role if they were actually *organized* as a denominational party, rather than seeking influence that dares not speak its name within the Republican party. This is hinted at (184) rather than extensively developed, though its full elucidation would have counted as the book's most original and challenging aspect. But this would have required a more extensive argument about how America's very political structures could or should be altered, rather than an exegesis of Rawls and Habermas. McGraw thinks that the 'deliberative restraint' suggested in various ways by the above theorists rests on 'mistaken moral, epistemological, and empirical claims' (87). Instead, 'given a society in which some portion of its citizens have religious views with public import, the obligations attendant on those believers are much more attenuated than the restraint argument suggests'. Public reason 'overestimates both the plausibility and attractiveness of a "restrained" political order and the threat of a religiously "engaged" one', for religious reasons 'are not ... categorically unintelligible or unreliable'; embracing religion would enable 'a view of liberal democratic life both more passionate, perhaps, in its engagement with our basic moral and religious commitments and more modest in its expectations of consensus and political agreement' (87, 89, 91).

This is now a common critique, made across the spectrum of positions in political theory and related disciplines. Smith may have a better excuse for writing as if 'the cage of secular discourse – within which public conversation and especially judicial and academic discourse occurs today' (23) is an all-encompassing scholarly consensus against which he is offering a lonely counter-strike. Perhaps to a legal academic, the sphere of pure logical reason purged of emotional or metaphysical elements is indeed a suffocating ideal. But in political theory as I have experienced it, one gets a lot further these days deconstructing secularism than affirming it, a lot further praising religion for enabling pluralism and agonism than mourning its irrationalities and prejudices. Both these authors are working within

a position that is close to ‘normal science’, but writing as if it were still a revolutionary situation.

Smith is known for witty and withering critiques of American jurisprudence, especially Constitutional Law, especially as it has negotiated ‘freedom of religion’. Here, though, his attentions are equally oriented towards political theory: we get sprightly critiques of Rawls’ ‘public reason’, Mill’s ‘harm principle’ and Nussbaum’s ‘capabilities approach’. Smith begins by asking why public discourse in the United States feels degraded and empty. Dismissing the social factors commonly sought out (television, the internet, failed schools) as ‘descriptions more of symptoms than of underlying causes’ (7), Smith turns to secularism’s alleged discursive hegemony to explain the problem: ‘the diagnosis ascribing the decay of these commitments and this discourse to religious believers and their political representatives is almost exactly wrong. It would be more accurate, ultimately, to attribute our current malaise to secular influences than to religion’ (111). This is the ‘disenchantment’ of the title (not stopping the Weber riff there, he refers over and over to the ‘secular cage’ we are locked in, that ‘close[s] out meaningful and authentic discussion’ [212]). Yet the book, though written with great accessibility, is mostly concerned with debates inside academe. The opening promissory note about explaining a general cultural malaise is unnecessary and misleading. Even if one thinks its most noxious aspects – politicians unconcerned with facts, media demagogues who verbally pulverize the public and so on – are worse than ever, that cannot have much to do with John Rawls and Martha Nussbaum. More plausible, perhaps, the *j’accuse* that bad philosophy has infected the courts, which in turn have dispirited the public – but that is not what Smith argues.

He begins the book with a particularly good riff on the paradoxes of ‘public reason’, noting how it has hollowed out or even inverted the ‘reason’ looked to by the Enlightenment. He describes how

in the eighteenth century a commitment to reason denoted a willingness to pursue the truth and to follow the argument wherever it leads, with the confidence that reason will ultimately lead people to converge on the truth. In contemporary political liberalism, in stark contrast, ‘reasonableness’ denotes a willingness *not* to pursue or invoke for vital public purposes what one believes to be the ultimate truth ... civic peace ... can be maintained only if people agree not to make important public decisions on the basis of arguing about what is ultimately true. (15)

Public reason, so goes his wonderful metaphor, is ‘Reason’s nemesis – or at least its nanny, whose task is to keep Reason under control and out of sight when the important public functions occur’ (13). This leads to ‘shallowness in

discourse' (17) and to what Smith deems a series of 'smuggling' operations, whereby the old comprehensive moral viewpoints proscribed by public reason are snuck back in. Indeed, 'conversations in the secular cage could not proceed very far *without* smuggling' (38) given the cage's neutered premises. This seems basically right: if 'public reason' depends upon bracketing our core morals and worldviews, then it is hardly akin to Enlightenment 'reason'. It is more like the pragmatism of the pre-Enlightenment *politiques* cut with modern American lifestyle relativism.

Given basic political stability and legitimacy, it is plausible that we would be better off arguing from whatever premises we actually hold than in trying to fine-tune a system of discursive restraint only a small band of philosophical skeptics could ever adhere to without hypocrisy. The assumption is that this would mostly benefit the religious, and in the current United States that might be true. But there is no reason secularists could not take the same advantage of the 'openness' Smith advertises. They could say that God is a delusory and incoherent concept that should not count in collective decision-making, that religion is a mechanism for perpetuating in-group/out-group divisions just as potent as racism, that tiny batches of cells without developed nervous systems cannot be 'murdered', and so forth. Whether this would exacerbate America's cultural conflicts or give us a more vibrant and inclusive public sphere, or both at once, I could not predict.

The Enlightenment looked to 'nature' and 'reason' for its morals, in lieu of priests and scriptures. Yet, as Smith's story goes, because modern natural science dispensed with teleological notions of the universe and our place in it (20ff.), we soon found that 'nature' and 'reason' could never produce the moral consensus promised. Indeed, Smith questions whether it can provide any morality at all: everything becomes meaningless matter in motion, a tiny portion of same congealed into what we recognize as human bodies (ch. 6). Trying to re-form our ethics, we create new concepts like the 'harm principle', but Smith thinks this just confuses matters by smuggling in older, teleological moral concepts without admitting it. Without them the harm principle is 'a hollow vessel ... into which adept advocates can pour whatever substantive views and values they happen to favor', (72) because some foundation no longer philosophically available is needed to tell us what should and should not count as harm. Nussbaum's 'capabilities approach' faces the same problem: 'The practical problem is that the judgmental criterion of the "really human" life now becomes useless for the resolution of any genuinely contested moral question' (171, 176).

This problem – call it the problem of perpetual foundational regress – is real, but it is not very interesting. What's more, bringing comprehensive teleologies like Aristotelianism or Thomism back into the equation would not solve it. Smith can keep pulling the rug out from under Mill or Nussbaum and

asking what it is, besides intuition, that they are really basing their principles on. But having the final answer be God does not help. Obedience to the foundations provided by God/scripture – if it is not a utilitarian Pascal’s wager about getting into heaven, or a habit drilled in by authorities – is itself ultimately just based on an intuition: an intuition that God is the sort of entity that should be obeyed. What non-question-begging principle could answer a challenge as to why I should obey the tenets of even a religion I knew to be cosmologically accurate? Because God created us and has a plan for us – but why follow it? Should certain beliefs or behaviors grant eternal life, there would be still no answer as to why I shall seek eternal life rather than damnation, outside of an appeal to my self-interest. Therefore, we would need some foundational premise to explain why such happiness is more important than autonomy (say, the autonomy of Milton’s Satan). God again? The foundational regress goes on.

In other words, it is unclear what Smith expects this opening up of the secular cage to do for the philosophical malaise he seeks to remedy; he is left, in the end, with only the chastened position that ‘we ought to be more open’ (213). One recalls his criticism of a free-floating harm principle: put like that, who could disagree? It is hard to introduce the problem of perpetual foundational regress without it backfiring on you. Letting the faithful be faithful in public will involve them in public life. Why is this a good thing? Maybe it makes them happier, and is thus a matter of compassion; maybe it makes them less likely to fester until they consider the regime illegitimate, and is thus a matter of self-interest; maybe it makes them freer and is thus a matter of rights or equality; and maybe it makes our public discourse richer and is a matter of collective virtue. How are any of these ultimate goals? Given Smith’s own premises, it seems one can support such an end by (a) simply appealing to an intuition that it is good, or (b) having recourse to the God/scripture/teleology whose value is the very thing up for debate.

In this sense McGraw’s book is more tractable, albeit narrower in philosophical scope. He simply posits engaged democratic politics as a goal, and then argues that allowing religious people leeway to be religious would help achieve that goal with minimal negative side effects (184). He dismisses as ‘dystopian’ the fears of Rawls and others about ‘the likely political effects of religion’s political mobilization’ especially ‘its potential for sparking political conflict’ (127, 89). McGraw is probably right that publicly legitimizing the mobilization of, say, Protestant evangelicals would not be our first step toward Weimar, or Srebrenica. Yet, surely this is not the secularists’ worry at its strongest. McGraw does not put much stock in a liberalism/democracy divide, which is fine, but this is one area where the divide could become starker than he allows. Proposition 8 in California is a good test case: plebiscitary democracy, with a strong component of ground-level religious

organizing, denied a class of citizens equal protection because of moral disapproval. A Rawlsian Court ruled it unreasonable.

Sure, the problem could be solved otherwise. Perhaps supporters of gay marriage should have regrouped and tried to win again in the electoral sphere. Perhaps, 10 years down the road, given the data on demographics and shifts in public opinion, they would have won in a walk. Yet, the fact would remain that, whether for months or decades, equal protection was denied because of a moral animus ultimately rooted in theology, and some citizens were sacrificed so that others could feel their religious commitments publicly affirmed. What's more, there was little evidence from the gay marriage debate that the religious positions were as open to 'rational critique and deliberation' (98–99) as McGraw suggests. The position that gay marriage threatens the integrity or sanctity of the heterosexual family does not even minimally satisfy any canons of evidence-based argument. It is, in all senses, an article of faith.

Perhaps many secular positions are, at bottom, held in this fashion also. And perhaps we should have 'faith in politics', to use McGraw's (double entendre?) title, that such matters will ultimately work themselves out best on the ground, and not in the rarefied realm of legal briefs criticized by Smith. These books certainly offer admirable challenges on that score. But in the interests of being up front, as Smith suggests, about ultimate visions of the good: mine is the Enlightenment of Paine, not Rawls, and I hope the religious men and women who step unashamedly into the public sphere are willing to hear him explain how Leviticus or the Koran are tribal relics. 'Disenchantment of secular discourse' notwithstanding, they have heretofore seemed just as willing as any other aggrieved group to employ the soporifics of tolerance-speak, where whatever bears upon one's 'identity' is surrounded by protections and taboos. So does opening the cage let us out, or let them in?

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