BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Religion in a Liberal State*

Religion in a Liberal State, by Gavin D'Costa, Malcolm Evans, Tariq Modood and Julian Rivers. Cambridge University Press, 2013

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Debates about religion and politics are difficult because what is at stake is a conflict between individuals' duties of citizenship and their deep commitments of conscience. *Religion in a Liberal State* addresses this issue from a multidisciplinary perspective that brings together the disciplines of law, sociology, political theory, and theology. It is composed of nine chapters, the first of which is a revised version of a lecture given by Raymond Plant on the topic "Religion in a Liberal State" at the University of Bristol in 2007. Plant argues that the 'politics of recognition' marginalizes religious identities on the grounds that these are a matter of individual choice and therefore are not apt for differentiated treatment. Religion's options are then two-fold; either to privatize or to liberalize. Both options, Plant argues, are at odds with liberalism's commitment to freedom of conscience. Instead, he proposes a return to the "blindness to difference" approach for adjudicating conflicts of pluralism, which should be arbitrated by an appeal to a reformulation of the harm principle. The remaining eight chapters –two for each discipline– "reflect on the questions and themes raised in Plant's lecture."

Ian Leigh's and Maleiha Malik's chapters analyze the notions of neutrality and equality in the context of recent decisions by international Courts. Leigh shows that the ECtHR has inconsistently applied the principle of neutrality, which might lead to an "imposition [. . .] of secularism" inspired by a "separatist model of religious neutrality" (p. 62). He shows that the ECtHR has interpreted neutrality as entailing "strict separation" or "equi-distance," which contradicts most European states' tradition of collaboration and moderate establishments. Malik explores conflicts between "sexual orientation equality" and religion, which have increased due to the implementation of equality provisions and non-discrimination laws. She proposes to guarantee broad rights to religious *beliefs*, while rights to *act* in accordance to such beliefs could be regulated for the sake of protection of the rights of other citizens.

Linda Woodhead's and Derek Mcghee's contributions give the sociological perspective of the book. They share the view that liberal-secular requirements towards religions in public debates are detrimental to religious commitments. Woodhead criticizes "radical secularism," which she considers as straightforwardly illiberal, prejudiced against religions, and insensitive towards historic contributions to liberal politics by religion. Mcghee discusses whether Habermas' recent proposals to broaden the role of religion in the public sphere offer a blueprint for institutionalizing Tariq Modood's "moderate secularism." He criticizes Jürgen Habermas' use of the dichotomy between citizens of faith / secular citizens, which he thinks operates under an assumption that is neither empirically accurate nor normatively promising, namely, that of fixed identities.

Political theorists Veit Bader and Cécile Laborde explore the nature of 'secular states' and investigate whether they are constitutively at odds with religion. Bader focuses on the view that defends religion's *foundational* status over competing religions and non-religion. He argues that foundationalism is not problematic as long as a minimal political morality, determined in relation to the basic values endorsed by both the liberal and democratic traditions, is taken into consideration. Laborde's chapter presents "justificatory secularism," which requires *religious* restraint in justifications of political power by state officials (and citizens running for elections.) This aspect of Laborde's position makes her view opposite to most arguments of the book, for she is the only one who openly defends religious restraint.

The last two chapters approach the debate from a theological perspective. John Milbank's dense chapter criticizes Habermas' procedural-rationalistic approach, which he thinks is grounded on a distinction between faith and reason that is philosophically incoherent and politically dangerous. Milbank draws on Hume's account of sympathy in order to propose that "feeling" be the mediator between reason and faith. John Perry's alternative to rules of religious restraint is to embrace rhetoric as a moral practice that citizens should master. He defends the discursive virtue of *decorum*, which is the capacity to appreciate what is "apt" to one's audience and to defend one's views accordingly without observing rules of religious restraint.

A book about religion and the liberal state does not need to be geographically comprehensive. However, if its main focus is on tensions between contemporary expressions of religion in Europe, then it can barely be said that the topic has been addressed exhaustively. Most of

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the chapters suggest that today it is hard to be religious in contemporary liberal states, yet they mostly refer to European church/state institutional arrangements and European processes of social secularization and diversification of religious beliefs. How do we know religious citizens' difficulty to express themselves in the public sphere on religious terms is due to liberal requirements rather than other social and political phenomena? The book is not self-explanatory in this respect because, apart from some isolated references to Court cases in the U.S., there are no chapters dedicated to the issue of religion and liberalism in non-European liberal states.

Even if one accepts the scholarly relevance of narrowing down the analysis to Europe's tensions between religion and liberalism, it is hard to be convinced that religious citizens find it difficult to express themselves in the liberal-European public sphere. The authors constantly repeat that liberalism is associated with religious restraint, which is interpreted as if liberalism compelled religion to be expressed only within what is considered the "private sphere." However, explorations in the meaning of the religious restraint requirement rely excessively on its theoretical dimension. In an interdisciplinary book

this approach is striking. This is particularly manifest in the sociological chapters, from which one would expect evidence about both the transformation of the (European) religious landscape and the impact current (European) liberal requirements have on religious organizations and citizens. Yet these chapters are theoretical and provide no empirical grounds to assess whether religion fares well in contemporary European states. The claim that religious restraint in European liberalism is harmful for religious citizens is neither reinforced nor refuted from an empirical perspective.

All in all, the book is an interesting attempt to build up bridges across disciplines on a divisive topic. It will be of interest for scholars willing to explore arguments in disciplines different from their own and, with the exception of a couple of chapters that are conceptually complex, for a non-expert audience interested in exploring the challenges liberal states face when they are genuinely committed to equally respecting everyone's freedom of conscience.

Competing Interests
The author declares that they have no competing interests.