

**Religion as Source, Resource, Evaluation, and Hindrance:  
Intellectual Humility and the Relationship Between Religion and Politics**

**Abstract**

How ought religion and democratic politics relate to each other in a spirit of intellectual humility? This article suggests four potential understandings of the relationship: hindrance, resource, evaluation, and source. Each of these understandings seems to take for granted a form of Enlightenment rationality (whether in support or opposition), and the final section of the paper develops a synthesis of Durkheim and Dewey to consider a different way through which religion and deliberative democracy can coexist, one more sensitive to the role of emotion, ritual, and contingency, and thereby more open to the problem of epistemic arrogance and the necessity for intellectual humility.

**1. Introduction**

In different ways, any form of deliberative democracy requires some level of humility, in that a deliberation in good faith will always require interlocutors to be willing to change their minds. Religion can complicate such humility, as has been described since at least as far back as Kant's definitional work on the Enlightenment: if people make certain claims based on *revelation* rather than *reason*, then not only are they bringing the non-rational into a space that is meant to be saved for reason-giving, but, more importantly, they make it very hard for the "best argument" to win as not all interlocutors necessarily agree on the nature of the revelation from which certain arguments draw. In this sense an argument such as "we should abolish the death penalty because it fits the message of the New Testament" is very different from "we should abolish the death penalty because it is unjust." While the latter claim could be true or false, it is an argument in which all interlocutors

might have stakes. In contrast, the former argument presumes that all interlocutors care about the message of the New Testament and will be moved by its authority. There is, some might say, an arrogance to this, and in two senses: first, that it insists that non-Christians concern themselves with the arguments of Christian sacred texts and second that it is relatively unmovable. Even if everyone else in a deliberative body gives compelling reasons that the death penalty is just, a Christian committed to her interpretation of her sacred text could refuse to be moved, citing a sacred commitment above and beyond deliberative democracy.

However, recent studies of the secular have suggested that revealed religion is really not so different from secular “social imaginaries” (Asad 2009, Taylor 2007). This is not to argue that to be secular is actually to be religious, but rather that both contain commitments to certain moral and political priors that come to feel self-evidently true. To return to whether the death penalty is just, whether or not justice should be equal for each individual in a society can be an argument to discuss, but it can also, even for the secular, be a non-negotiable commitment that is as much believed to be true as it is felt to be *right*, and right in a sense that exists prior to and extends beyond any argument.

Such moral immovability can be inspiring if we consider it a form of righteous prophecy, a status its proponents might well designate themselves. But what if it is cruelty or bigotry? It is almost certainly prejudice, not in the sense in which the word is often used today, but in its more straightforward etymological sense of judging something or someone before it has been fully considered: regardless of what we learn or the claims we hear in deliberation, there are certain things we believed before the interaction that we will still believe to be true, and we believe those even *regarding the matters under deliberation*. Nothing could have changed our minds. How can a democratic politics move forward if minds cannot be changed?

Hundreds of scholars have attempted to answer these questions, and none has seemed to solve the problem in full, so I suggest what follows here with my own form of humility. Yet I nonetheless

suggest that part of the problems I describe above come from a confusion about the relationship between religion and democratic politics. I review these distinctions below, using that work to set up a contrast between Habermasian/neo-Kantian models of deliberation and a more Deweyan focus, albeit one rendered more sensitive to emotion and ritual via Durkheim. While I am sufficiently humble about this fusion of Dewey and Durkheim to solve our problems of intellectual humility, I nonetheless hope it is an argument worth considering in the public sphere.

## 2. Politics and Religion

If the Enlightenment opposed itself to anything, it was to religion. Indeed, an opposition to religious dogmatism forms a key element of Kant's "What is Enlightenment" (2013), and, in different ways, the Scottish, French, and German Enlightenments each shared a suspicion of institutional churches and constraining doctrines. However, they did not necessarily all oppose religion, *per se*. Kant, after all, was a famous defender of some kind of religious experience, as was Rousseau. The Scottish Enlightenment was more famously atheist, though Smith still nods at the importance of religion in *The Moral Sentiments* (2010). Where the Enlightenment came together in opposition to religion was not necessarily regarding the existence of God or even belief in and respect for such a being. While there were a few radically aggressive and scornful atheists, most saved their opprobrium for those who would say, in Kant's words, "Do not argue—believe!" This phrase from "What is Enlightenment" is how Kant imagines "the pastor" speaking to those who would seek the freedom of the Enlightenment, which is to say the freedom to use their own reason. Yet it is striking how Kant situates a religious dogmatism next to the strict constraints of tax collectors, officers, rulers, and rigid texts. Political and intellectual dogmatism is parallel to and intermixed with religious dogmatism. The problem is an intellectual leadership who lacks humility, in contrast to a democratic polis willing and able to subject anything to criticism.

Ever since these Enlightenment critiques, assumptions that the institutional church would eventually fade—and with it, potentially, any kind of religious belief—have pervaded Western thought. Challenging these theories of secularism have become increasingly common lately, and while there have been many theories of the relationship between religion and politics, I organize them here into four categories: hindrances, resources, evaluations, and sources. In the interests of space and relevance to the topic at hand, I am focusing almost exclusively on democratic politics, so while there are a wide variety of important texts on religion's relationship to other forms of government, especially monarchy, theocracy, totalitarianism, and fascism, I will not be able to engage those here.

### 2.1 *Hindrances*

Casanova lists three “clearly distinguished dimensions” of the “Enlightenment critique of religion”: “a cognitive one directed against metaphysical and supernatural worldviews; a practical-political one directed against ecclesiastical institutions; and a subjective expressive-aesthetic-moral one directed against the idea of God itself” (2011: 30). Each of these is important in different ways regarding the question of democratic participation but by far the most important was the idea of *freedom*. Whether than freedom was more a freedom from (negative) or a freedom to (positive), the Church (and to some degree, any kind of theology) got in the way. Neither Rousseau nor Spinoza nor Kant had any trouble with a kind of natural religion; in fact, all three thought it was to some degree necessary. While certain other Enlightenment characters treated any form of religion with outright suspicion, most regarded religions, and even a church, as Kant did: a sometimes-necessary element of moral formation, even if we should be suspicious of their potential to evoke superstition, fetishism, and slavish devotion to unprovable and unreasonable claims.

Religion, in other words, is *unreasonable*—not of necessity, but as a general rule. As such, it must be cordoned off. Yet why is religion unreasonable? For Kant, Rousseau, Hume, Voltaire, and Spinoza, much of the problem was in the relationship between epistemology and politics: people could not be free to determine their own lives if they were beholden to particular “revealed” commitments, commitments which were especially vulnerable to historical and philosophical critiques. They sought a religion without scripture and without clerics, and they did so in a way that emphasized spontaneous human interaction and the giving of reasons.

These are old philosophical problems with massive literatures and so there is not sufficient space here to examine all of their implications. For this argument, what matters most is the way that Habermas (1991) deals with the problems of separating interests from reasons through insisting on the importance of *deliberation*: people bring their respective interests to the discussion, and these interests are always supported by reasons. After a sharing of opinions, interlocutors will deliberate rationally, with the best argument winning and people’s interests aligning with the best course of action. There are many criticisms of this insistence that the best argument will win despite social differences, yet most relevant for our purposes here is the way that Habermas’s discourse ethic seem necessarily to oppose religious commitments in the revealed sense that his Enlightenment forebears also opposed. After all, if something is ipso facto true and therefore immune to rational critique, it makes any kind of real deliberation about the thing impossible.

While recognizing the problem of religion, Habermas, like Kant before him, has much less of a problem with the sacred, although his recognition of sacred experience is more sociologically Durkheimian than noumenally Kantian. Synthesizing Mead and Durkheim, Habermas argues that the sacred has become *linguistic*, e.g. “the transfer of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization from sacred foundations over to linguistic communication and action oriented to mutual understanding” (1987: 107). The description might well work as a Durkheimian

understanding of the secular, e.g. how the emergent sense of the “sacred” power of society maintains itself in a non-religious age. Yet for those for whom revealed religion continues to matter, the call of the sacred demands very different things than just talking to each other. Nonetheless, it is *through* talking to each other that such demands must be carried out. Habermas is suspicious of religious arguments as *justification for power*: this is not necessarily because religious arguments lack “semantic contents, and even secret intuitions of their own” (2017: 223) but rather because they are not yet *translated* in a way that any rational speaker could understand. He is not opposed to religious arguments in the “public sphere” provided they are “‘translated’ – that is secular” once they move “into the formal agendas of state institutions” (2017: 223).

This acknowledgement of the space for religious deliberation contrasts with the more restrictive understanding of the place of religion in Rawls’s understanding. While Rawls moderated himself over time—going from a complete rejection of religious reasons to a need for translation—he nonetheless emphasizes the degree to which public reason must appeal to one of three political conceptions: applying to basic political and social institutions, presentable independently from comprehensive doctrines, and understandable from the ideas already implicit in constitutionalism. “This requirement,” he argues, “still allows us to introduce into political discussion at any time our comprehensive doctrine, religious or nonreligious, provided that, in due course, we give properly public reasons to support the principles and policies our comprehensive doctrine is said to support” (1997: 776). While Rawls distinguishes public reason from “secular” reason, his critics do not necessarily appreciate the distinction: they argue that they are still forced to “split their identities in public discourse” with “the burdens of citizenship” thereby “asymmetrical distributed.” (Yates 2007: 880).

Habermas is sensitive to such criticisms, and he acknowledges that religious language should be allowed in the public sphere. More than this, he suggests that just as the religious should seek to

understand their fellow citizens of different religions or without religion, so those without religion should seek to understand the religious. Yet this only goes so far: Habermas wants to keep the state from justifying its actions through religious reasons. This is illegitimate, he argues, because of “the violation of the principle of the neutrality of the exercise of political power which holds that all coercively enforceable political decisions must be *formulated* and be *justifiable* in a language that is equally intelligible to all citizens” (2008: 134; italics his). This restriction goes further than it might appear however, because even if Habermas grants that anyone can say whatever they would like in the public sphere, for their words to have an effect on government policy, the religious (or their government allies) must find ways to translate their commitments. As a result, it still seems fair to argue that Habermas requires religious citizens to split their identities, at least to the extent they want their reasons to reach the highest levels of the society.

Such a need for splitting seems to give secular liberals an unfair advantage both politically and epistemically (Audi and Wolterstorff 1997: 67-120). The question becomes even more complicated to the degree that a commitment to Habermasian deliberative democracy cannot necessarily distinguish itself from any other revealed commitment. Rawls attempts to overcome this problem through his commitment to “overlapping consensus” while Habermas suggests that his procedural (as opposed to substantive) focus distinguishes deliberation and, for that matter, justice, from more substantive questions of the good life. The distinction is not without its uses, yet Habermas’s own genealogical linkage of the sacred to the discursive challenges any easy separation. As Taylor argues, even the most stripped down of proceduralism still hinges upon certain moral imaginaries, imaginaries with both religious roots and religious parallels (2007).

This is not necessarily to argue that Habermasian discourse theory is an *ersatz* religion, even if some like Neuhaus (see below) might make such an argument about robust liberalism, a position shared by Durkheim, albeit regarding French republicanism (1958, 2011). Yet such questions about

the real nature of religion can distract from more relevant questions about the role of things people call religion (Guhin 2014). Religion can be more than simply a hindrance to—or replacement of—democratic politics. In the next two sections, we review how religion can be a resource or an evaluation of democratic politics, then turning to a study of how some regard religion as a source of democratic politics.

## 2.2 *Resources*

Those who view religion as a *resource* for politics (Williams 1996, Wood 1999) tend to emphasize its importance as a mediating and socializing institution for democratic processes that are not themselves necessarily religious. Others describe how religious ideas can serve as important resources even without a necessary connection to religious beliefs. Finally, religion can serve as a motivator and tool to engage in politics without necessarily being the *source* or *content* of democratic politics.

### 2.2.1 *Mediating Institutions*

Tocqueville's study of religion (2000) in the United States has been hugely influential to a variety of thinkers, especially those who emphasize the role of "civil society" (Cohen and Arato 1994) in creating mediating institutions between the state and the individual (Deneen 2018, Nisbet 2014, Putnam 2001). For these thinkers, whether or not religion is necessary as a *source* for politics, it serves as a necessary resource in maintaining democratic associations and (properly ordered) democratic sensibilities. Tocqueville states simply, "I doubt that man can ever support a complete religious independence and an entire political freedom at once; and I am brought to think that if he

has no faith, he must serve, and if he is free, he must believe” (2000: 418-419). While Tocqueville acknowledges his own religiosity, his argument employs a “human point of view.” In so doing, he puts the majority of the causal power for this situation less in religion itself than in the fact of equality in America, both as a material reality and an ideological commitment. That equality’s material effects on religion can be rendered less deleterious if religion maintains its “greatest advantage” (2000: 419).

That advantage is religion’s ability to temper individualism and keep it from turning into selfishness, which “withers the seed of all the virtues” (2000: 483). It is “free institutions” that combat individualism, and religious institutions are some of the most important of these, not so much in explicitly influencing laws or politics but rather in forming morals and ideals: “Religion, which among Americans, never mixes directly in the government of society, should therefore be considered as the first of their political institutions; for if it does not give them the taste for freedom, it singularly facilitates their use of it” (2000: 280). Religion’s separation from power prevents it from taking on the veneer of corrupt self-interest it has in Europe, and it is able to maintain itself as a moral support and counter-weight to the raucous self-interest of democratic citizens.

While Tocqueville often talks about religion as a thing in itself, he almost always refers to it in its organizational form, with its ministers, rites, and beliefs. Those organizations are actually what is most important, because it is in them that people will be socialized into the right kinds of democrats, those who care about freedom as much as equality, and who do not retreat so far into individualism that they lose all sense of community. Contemporary Tocquevillians are often conservative, though not necessarily so, and nearly all of them warn of vicious circle that begins once mediating institutions weaken (Deneen 2018). Without such institutions, individuals depend more upon themselves, and then rely on the state for what they cannot do, which grows in response, leading both individualism and statism to grow in concert and at the expense of the institutions (and

democratic deliberation) in between. Religious institutions are therefore a necessary resource not only for the edification of democratic citizens but as stopgaps to prevent either individualism or the state from growing too strong. Such concerns have important resonance for those worried about the problem of arrogance (or the possibility of humility) in a democracy: mediating institutions are forced to work without the coercive power of the state, and against the atomistic indifference of individualism, making a commitment to some form of humility a necessary element.

### 2.2.2 *Concepts*

Another way that religion can serve as a resource for politics is through providing concepts that can be useful for democratic citizens without necessarily requiring religious commitments. While there are many examples of such concepts, I want to focus on two: Augustine's conception of the just war (Langan 1984) and Niebuhr's description of original sin. First, Augustine's description of the just war, worked out in *City of God* and *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, has been an incredibly influential concept that has been useful to both leaders and citizens in opposing and justifying war. One of the most recent important applications of this concept was that of the political theorist Jean Elshtain, whose *Just War Against Terror* (2008) used Augustine to argue that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were both just. This suggestion was paralleled by many of the neoconservative thinkers of the era. Whether or not Elshtain and others cheerleaders for the Iraq invasion were correct is irrelevant to the point at hand, which is that the concept of just war, developed by a theologian and used, originally, primarily within a religion context, became an important concept for secular discussion of political decisions (Chesterman 2001).

Similarly, various secular scholars have found the writing of Reinhold Niebuhr increasingly helpful as a means of understanding human anthropology and political decision-making, and the

early twentieth century saw a rise of Niebuhr interest, with then candidate Obama describing him as one of his favorite philosophers (Crouter 2010, Lemert 2011, Sabella 2017). What is important here is that such insights can be gained without necessarily getting on board with Niebuhr's broader theological vision (Elie 2007). Perhaps the most important of Niebuhr's insights was his deeply ambivalent view of human nature, expressed in one of his most famous epigrams: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary" (2011: xxxii). That quote is from *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, subtitled "a vindication of democracy and a critique of its traditional defense." The book's defense of democracy is generally secular, though Niebuhr argues "modern idealists" must "recognize that the profundities of the Christian faith, which they have disavowed, are indispensable resources for the historic tasks which lie before us" (2011: 188). Yet such an emphasis on Christianity is not actually necessary for what is primarily a realist study of human selfishness and vainglory alongside, somehow, a capacity to do (and to want to do) good. Niebuhr would have understood this tension as that of original sin opposed to humanity's being made in the image of God, yet the hard willingness to acknowledge human evil in a way that was relatively translatable to secular concerns was what made Niebuhr so attractive to so many. As Crouter puts it, "Niebuhr believed that humanity is afflicted with excessive pride and a self-preoccupation that distorts moral judgment. For him this view was an empirical fact of human experience, borne out in everyday observations of human affairs (2010: 41). What those politicians, scholars, and journalists who read Niebuhr take from him is this sensitivity to evil alongside, even more importantly, a sense of irony: what Americans think is their reason for pride might well be their greatest sin. We should tread carefully, as a result, with humility and care. These insights make sense in a religious context, but they do not require it, making them one example of how religion can provide insights as resources for a broader, secular politics. And relevant for this

discussion, they provide an example of how religion need not provide resources for intellectual arrogance: as Niebuhr shows, sometimes religion cautions us to be humble.

### 2.2.3 Motivations and Cultural Tools

The third way that religion can be a resource is through providing the motivation to act politically, as well as a means of acting. This insight is similar to those described by Tocqueville, though with a more specific focus on *motivation* and *form*. What gets people moving and what enables those movements? This is a subtly different issue from the *source* or *basis* of politics. For example, the sociological study of social movements has often identified religion as an important motivator for social action, as well as an important “tool for facilitating local organizing and activism” (Patillo-McCoy 1998: 767). Patillo Mc-Coy shows how, for the black Chicago neighborhood she studied, the *content* is often not “explicitly religious” though “the form takes on the tenor of a black church service” (1998: 769). Yet the black church provides more than simply “a common language that leaders and followers, workers and supporters can share to coordinate action” (1998: 781). It also provides a source of motivation, a means through which problems are framed and then acknowledged as *religious* problems rather than purely secular ones. Certain forms of religious culture *in and of themselves* provide tools for sustaining social movements (Braunstein, Fulton and Wood 2014, Effler 2010, Wood 1994). In a similar way, scholars of religion and social movements have shown how, as with Casanova’s work on public religion, religious movements identify religion both as a reason to do what they do and a set of tools to solve the problems they have identified as their own (Braunstein 2017, Lichterman 2005, Williams 2003).

### 2.3 Evaluations

Religious evaluations of politics can take a variety of forms, some of which ultimately come to resemble the concepts or cultural tools described above. Yet there is another way of thinking of religion as an evaluation, or rather the phenomenological grounding through which evaluations come to make sense and gain salience. As such, religions can provide not only alternative visions of how a secular, public modernity might operate, but, as a result of this counterfactual to modernity, they can also provide a contrary means of evaluating political decisions. Casanova, for example, argues that “public” or “de-privatized” religion in the 1980’s “compels us to rethink the relationship of religion and modernity and, more importantly, the possible roles religions may play in the public sphere of modern societies” (2011: 6). Casanova cites both Neuhaus (who we will describe in the next section) and Tocqueville, but more important is that the basis of the evaluations Casanova describes is often rooted in religious language: “public religion” in Spain, Poland, Brazil, and the United States all make claims for and about the public good that are evaluations of how their society is and how it should be, evaluations that are unapologetically religious. Casanova cites Benhabib’s criticism of Habermas (1992) calling for the radical critique of the Habermasian distinction between justice and the good life (2011: 65). Public religious actors seek to talk about the good life as well, sharing evaluations that are rooted in religious commitments and thereby challenging secularist theories of religion’s inevitable differentiation and privatization (2001: 39).

Both Habermas and his Kantian cousin Rawls have been sensitive to such critiques, especially the idea that religion can provide an important means of *public* and not simply *private* moral life. Yet what if religion is not *separate* from politics but is actually the *source* of politics? It is a provocative claim, and one we explore in the next section.

## 2.4 Sources

As I see them, there are two ways to think about religion as a source for democratic politics, and I will title each with the different names associated with the approach I am describing, even if these authors might not agree: Durkheim and Neuhaus. A Durkheimian approach does not necessarily acknowledge “religion” as referring to an actual God or moral law, but it does describe how society creates something that *feels* religious, and which thereby exerts a kind of religious power. Society is necessarily religious, as a result, and so are its politics. A Neuhasian approach is quite different, in that it assumes a kind of religious (and generally Christian) understanding of the universe is necessary for the proper functioning of democratic liberalism. However, Neuhaus is careful never to call for a theocracy: the separation of church and state matters on a *procedural* level but those procedures only continue to work because of people’s commitments to religious practices and beliefs.

### 3.1.1 Durkheim

To the extent that politics is something different from society, then Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms* (1995) is rarely about politics at all: there is little meaningful discussion of contestation, deliberation, or working out with (or against) each other the best way to organize a society. He does describe—in painstaking detail—how tribes have found various strategies for coexistence, particularly regarding the disparate treatment of totem animals. Yet the politics are never especially important; instead, Durkheim focuses on the *social*, the moments of “collective effervescence” and collective meaning-making through which society comes to recognize itself and becomes felt as an autonomous force of real power. This, for Durkheim, is the source of religion itself, a misrecognized

means through which individuals come to understand the emergent and ever-present role of society in their lives.

Yet there are a few famous moments in Durkheim's discussion of totems where he links all of this back to the modern era, politics and all: "...social life is only possible thanks to a vast symbolism... Collective feelings can just as well be incarnated in persons as in formulas. Some formulas are flags; some real or mythic personages are symbols" (1995: 233). This insight links Durkheim's conception of a primitive society all the way to the contemporary, a claim he makes throughout the book (e.g. that modern science is not so epistemologically different from early Australian religion). In this sense, Durkheim's study of religion *is* about politics, in that the book is about social life, and how every human experience—including politics—is necessarily social. While Durkheim's thesis does not necessarily contradict a social contract understanding of politics, it does challenge its underlying ontology significantly. For Durkheim, any social contract can only exist because people are already and necessarily embedded within an emergent reality called society. In much social contract theory, politics (e.g. the contract) precedes and even makes possible society. For Durkheim, the situation is reversed. As a result, everything political exists and gains its meaning through the social, and it is social experiences and processes (codes, boundaries, totems, taboos) that give politics its meaning. Such has been the central insight of Durkheimian studies of politics, especially those of the "strong program" of cultural sociology (Alexander 2006, Alexander and Smith 2010).

In this "strong program" work, and in other sociological projects that link Durkheim's study of religion to contemporary politics, there is often little use of the words "religion" or "religious" even if words contained within that category are quite common, such as sacred, profane, totem, and ritual. Yet even the presence of these terms seems to point to an argument common among more liberal Christians in the second half the twentieth century: that everyone is really religious. In

different ways, both Tillich's conception of "ultimate concern" (1964) and Rahner's concept of "anonymous Christianity" (1976) argue that religion forms the basis of human experience, and that something like faith—or even Christianity itself—is actually the template for how humans live. Such arguments are not new, and they parallel very old discussions of "natural religion" in early modernity up through sociology's founding generation (Byrne 2013, Hume 1980, Marx and Engels 1970, Müller 1889). We're all actually religious, these people argue, whether we admit it or not. And so religion and politics intersect because people and politics intersect.

There are two ways to understand such arguments, and many of the proponents slip between the two as they need not necessarily contradict each other: the first position is that intellectual modernity—that is the Enlightenment and its aftermath—is not "legitimate" (Blumenberg 1985), that is, it is not actually marked by a separation from its religious past. Instead, religious language, values, and identities are constitutive elements of the modern project, even those projects that understand themselves as militantly secular (Gillespie 2008, Löwith 2011, Nietzsche 1996, Taylor 2007). Such an argument does not necessarily imply that these religious undercurrents are true or normatively good: it is simply establishing a genealogical, practical, and ideological continuity. In this reading, it is not necessarily the case that *everyone is religious* or that *politics always has religious elements*. It is simply a contingent story of Western modernity, so while such arguments more or less capture the North Atlantic and its settler colonies, it need not describe, for example, Japan (Josephson 2012). Indeed, perhaps paradoxically, an argument that religiosity is baked into the history of the West has been an important element of arguments that religiosity need not be understood as a central part of social life (Asad 2009).

The second way of understanding the term that "we are all religious" is to assume that religion, in some form, is actually true. The most parsimonious way of understanding such a position is simply to posit as a theory that that God exists (Smith 2003). Yet this second position also need

not be theist, though it often is. Durkheim himself is perhaps the best manifestation of the atheist version of this argument, as he regularly insists that religions are “grounded in and express the real” (1995: 2). Indeed, for Durkheim it is religious experience that helped to form social life itself: if there is such a thing as an original “social contract” for Durkheim that precedes social life, it is not the meeting of individuals to determine as a group their best interest but rather the meeting of semi-conscious beings who create religious rituals through which society—and with it, consciousness—emerges (Rawls 1996). To the extent that Durkheim is right about the social requirements of political life, he provides us with a different way to orient our deliberations, one that might be able to ground a commitment to humility—or so we will discuss in this article’s final section.

#### 2.4.1 *Neuhaus*

In *The Naked Public Square* (1984), written in the wake of the Moral Majority’s role in electing Ronald Reagan, Neuhaus seems at first ambivalent about the necessarily religious nature of what he describes as the “public ethic” that makes liberal democracy possible, that is, the common understandings and forms of mutual recognition through which people are able to be *liberal* and *democratic* to and with each other. He argues that such a public ethic must be “informed by religiously grounded values” because of the “sociological fact” that the “values of the American people are deeply rooted in religion” (1984: 21). Yet as the book goes on, it appears more and more certain that Neuhaus believes this is more than simply an American situation or a sociologically contingent one.

Neuhaus’s need to clothe the public square in religious garb is also just a numbers problem: there are many religious people who feel alienated by a public square that asks the religious “to check our deepest beliefs at the door” (1984: 28). Neuhaus’s argument remains a liberal one: he insists that “public decisions must be made by arguments that are public in character. A public

argument is transsubjective. It is not derived from sources of revelation or disposition that are essentially private and arbitrary” (1984: 36). The question is not the content of the arguments but the *source* of the arguments, as well as the underlying *ethic* that makes the relationships and trust through which to have the arguments imaginable and then possible.

For Neuhaus, such an ethic must *necessarily* be religious. “When recognizable religion is excluded [from the public square], the vacuum will be filled by an *ersatz* religion... Again, to paraphrase Spinoza, transcendence abhors a vacuum” (1984: 80). The very nature of laws, Neuhaus insists, require a transcendent rooting for those laws. Even if some do not recognize the source of right vs. wrong as transcendent, it is nonetheless the case that “law is produced and sustained by the perception of a people that law is somehow correlated with the way things really are, or with the way things really should be” (1984: 254). It is only through religion (or *ersatz* religions like communism) that liberal democracies can move beyond their proceduralist negative freedoms and determine what their freedom is actually *for*. Liberal democracy provides the how, but religion provides the why. Neuhaus is suspicious of Rawls for much the same reason we described above concerning Durkheim and the social contract: society—and the politics which drive it—must be considered more than simply the sum of so many individuals.

Neuhaus cites the Jesuit priest John Courtney Murray to distinguish his politics from those of fundamentalist “majoritarians” (1984: 201): while the latter seek an imposition of Christian law without any appeals to public reason, the former sought to show the necessary relationship *between* public reason and public religion. While Murray’s book *We Hold These Truths* (2005) was primarily an insistence that the American experience disproved the Catholic Church’s centuries old suspicion of democracy, it was also a reflection on democracy itself, including its underlying “public philosophy.” Murray distinguishes himself from pragmatists—“it is false to say that what works is true”—but he shares with Dewey (and, for that matter, with Niebuhr, Durkheim, and countless others) a

commitment to figuring out what unites a society besides its social contract. For Murray, natural law provides the authority for democracy's consensus which is, if nothing else, a consensus to focus on certain shared problems even if we disagree on how they ought to be solved. That natural law is recognizable to anyone, religious or not, but its "ultimate origin" is God (2005: 117).

That commitment to natural law is increasingly common in conservative American politics (Finnis 2011, George 1994), and it has been criticized for naturalizing what are actually historically arbitrary moral commitments, thereby being able to make religious claims while claiming a non-religious natural argument. Regardless of the relative merits of natural law, it is important as an example of something similar to what Neuhaus describes. For even though natural law claims to be a non-religious (*natural*) way of describing the world, it is nearly always religious people who use it, and it borrows its concept from Thomistic theology. Yet in presenting natural law arguments in the public square, advocates take from their revelation those elements they feel can be adjudicated by any reasonable person, as opposed to those which require revealed commitments.

### **3. Dewey on Democracy, Emotion and Faith**

In the preceding section we described how we could understand religion as a hindrance, resource, evaluations, or source of democratic politics. However, none of these depictions finally resolves the deeper ontological questions of, first, whether religion (or something like religion) is *necessary* for democratic politics, and, second, whether religion (or something like religion) is *good* for democratic politics, especially regarding a capacity to, at the same time, maintain prophetic commitments while remaining humble to the possibility of error.

Perhaps the answer to these questions is simply to reject them, or at least to reorient them, in the spirit of pragmatism, towards a concern about what works within our experience as opposed

to what must be true about the world previous to and beyond our experience within it. If that is the case, then religion can serve less as an ontological sounding board and more as a useful resource for giving individual and collective lives a unified integrity, an integrity through which politics at once becomes more meaningful (because it builds upon something deeper) and less fundamental (because it is not the exclusive or even most important domain of social life).

John Dewey sought to answer similar questions in his insistence that democracy required “a common faith” that unapologetically adopted religious language: perhaps the most famous discipline of his lifetime, Sidney Hook, criticized Dewey for making too many concessions to religion (Ryan 1995: 273). Yet Dewey did not necessarily see it that way. He wanted to separate religion from the supernatural, and he did so by understanding religion as anything that provides a unity to a self towards particular ideals: “Any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value is religious in quality” (1971: 27). Such a religion is “morality touched by emotion,” though only “when the ends of moral conviction arouse emotions that are not only intense but are actuated and supported by ends so inclusive that they unify the self” (1971: 22). Dewey distinguishes these moral and emotional commitments from intelligence, arguing that moral faith is much more than an assent to an intellectual proposition.

An ideal’s authority, he argues, is more than simply the authority of certain facts. His suggestion that these two can often be conflated calls to mind recent concerns about humans’ *capacity* to have rational deliberations (Chen, Duckworth and Chaiken 1999, Giner-Sorolila and Chaiken 1997, Kahan 2013, Mercier and Sperber 2011, Redlawsk 2002, Taber and Lodge 2006, von Hippel and Trivers 2011). “What we ardently desire to have thus and so, we tend to believe is already so,” he warns. “Desire has a powerful influence upon intellectual beliefs” (1971: 22). Dewey therefore calls not so much for more intelligence but rather a faith *in* intelligence, a faith in

“continued and rigorous inquiry” that “can become religious in quality” (1971: 26). It is only through such faith that deliberation becomes possible as a *social* process.

As such, Dewey’s commitment to a common faith comes to resemble Tillich’s ultimate concern, and Rorty argues the two are basically indistinguishable (1991: 69). The similarities are important, not least in how they share a move that some consider the unintended endgame of liberal Protestantism: a move from doctrine to morals, locating the experience of God so fully in mystical experience and moral commitments that it is utterly immune to empirical critique (Berger 1969, Rockefeller 1994). Such a move, Asad argues, keeps religion safe from liberalism and liberalism safe from religion (2009). Yet, even if the move towards a moralistic religion might be a rearguard maneuver for the liberal Protestant theologians of Dewey’s era, Rogers (2008) argues that this description doesn’t really fit what Dewey is up to, nor, I would argue, does it accurately capture Tillich’s project, which is at its most basic a phenomenological attempt to capture how human understanding can reconcile the problems of ambiguity and the ultimate, especially within questions of religion.

Dewey is trying something similar but in a different realm. Rorty tells his students “they should treat Dewey and Tillich as saying the same thing to different audiences” (1991: 69), yet Dewey’s fixation on democracy means that not only was the audience different but also, to a large degree, so were the goals and the methods. Dewey, like Tillich, wanted to challenge some of the unnecessary cognitivism of religion, focusing instead on the moral and emotional capacities of religion. The move parallels longstanding critiques of fundamentalism from within Christianity, especially the degree to which fundamentalism tends to unintentionally imitate the Enlightenment’s focus on discursive truth claims in place of ritual and liturgy, thereby ignoring the truth contained within narrative’s *meaning*, focusing instead on the truth claims contained within the content (Noll 1994).

However, Dewey argues that pushing against cognitivism is still not far enough, because the point is bringing people together for the good of a democratic public. He describes three stages of historical growth related to religion. The first views humans as so evil as to need redemption from the supernatural; the second, what he described as the position of liberal theologians of his era, finds the significance of human relations in something distinctly religious. “The third stage,” Dewey writes, “would realize that in fact the values prized in those religions that have ideal elements are idealization of things characteristic of natural association, which have then been projected into a supernatural realm for safe-keeping and sanction” (1971: 73). The point of religion, then, is to honor what is immanent rather than what is eternal: it is a deeply Emersonian insight (Rogers 2008: 107-144), as well one that connects Dewey as much to Durkheim as to Tillich.

Like Durkheim, Dewey here insists on the *reality* of religion, even if it is not necessarily related to anything transcendent. Dewey is much harsher than Durkheim regarding belief in the supernatural, though he shares Durkheim’s connection of religion to emotion. Yet while Durkheim’s theory of religion must be *applied* to politics, for Dewey the very point of religion is its applicability to our common problems as a group, which, for him, is basically his understanding of politics as well. Reason is a key element of this, but a reasoning intelligence guided and driven by emotion, which can therefore be understood as itself a kind of common faith that undergirds political life:

Intelligence, as distinct from the older conception of reason, is inherently involved in action. Moreover, there is no opposition between it and emotion. There is such a thing as passionate intelligence, as ardor in behalf of light shining from the murky places of social existence, and as zeal for its refreshing and purifying effects. The whole story of man shows that there are no objects that may not deeply stir engrossing emotion. One of the few experiments in the attachment of emotion to ends that mankind has not tried is that of devotion, so intense as to be religious, to intelligence as a source for social action (1971: 79).

By intelligence, Dewey means science in its broadest sense (1971: 33), a kind of collective testing of ideas together, making him an important early forerunner of contemporary debates about deliberative democracy (Bohman 2000, Honneth 1998, Westbrook 1998).

If Dewey is a forerunner of deliberative democracy, then his late theory of democracy, seen most clearly in *The Public and its Problems* (2016), provides solutions to some of the problems we described above. Most important, in Axel Honneth's opinion, is an underlying emphasis on a just division of labor rather than simply proceduralist speech codes. The "common ground" required to undergird speech is more possible in Dewey than in Habermas because a more just division of labor makes it "possible to experience communicative relatedness" as a middle way between "an overethicized republicanism and an empty proceduralism" (1998: 779-780). While Honneth points primarily to problems of economic inequality in his description of the flaws of democracy, Dewey's work also recognizes the problems we would now refer to as "identity politics," which he believed were soluble to the degree that Americans could come together in democratic efforts. He wrote that he prefers the metaphor of the orchestra to that of the melting pot, "but genuine assimilation to *one another*—not to Anglosaxondom—seems to be essential to America [italics his]" Note that in this sense, Dewey calls just as much for those groups in the elite to be assimilated as those who are not: "That each cultural section should maintain its distinctive literary and artistic traditions seems to me most desirable, but in order that it might have more to contribute to others" (Westbrook 1998: 212-214).

A conservative critic might find fault with Dewey's argument, as might a secular critic or a religious critic who is not Christian or Jewish. While a non-Christian or atheist might reject Dewey's use of the implicitly Christian concepts of faith and God, another kind of religious critic might reject their inability to make claims based on their revealed texts, arguing that certain philosophical

positions are just as intractable and unfalsifiable. More importantly, some conservatives (religious or not) might argue that Dewey's position is simply too optimistic.

Dewey anticipates such a complaint in *A Common Faith*, writing that his argument "involves no expectation of a millennium of good" (1971: 46). He might well acknowledge the Christian heritage of his use of words like "God" and "faith" but he is situating them in a Christian society in which they are intended to do a certain amount of work. Similarly, Dewey would have no problem admitting that philosophies can be just as dogmatic as religions, and this makes those philosophies just as much of a problem. The point is to rid ourselves of dogma, and the supernatural weight and restriction dogmas tend to accrue. The use of the word "God," like anything else Dewey suggests, is an attempt to solve a problem, in this case the sense of isolation and alienation from nature, community, and the world at large. It is an attempt to isolate the power of the "religious" (as opposed to religion) in focusing a human life, in giving it a sense of continuity and purpose. In this sense, the problem is only partially that dogmas are wrong.

The problem is that dogmas might not *work*, and to see if they work, we have to be open to testing them. As Rogers (2008) makes clear, Dewey was profoundly influenced by Darwin's emphasis on contingency and it is a fundamental misreading to regard Dewey as an optimist: things very well might not work. The point is not that things will always get better but that they can get better, and that there is no necessary reason to be cynical about human capabilities (Rogers 2008: 120-125; Westbrook 1998: 523-532). No matter what, we can try, and we can try with the tools available to us at the time. We are born *into* the use of these tools rather than freely choosing them, making our agency socially constituted and humble rather than autonomous and heroic. In this sense, Dewey has no problem with many of the ways religion can be a source, resource, or means of evaluation for people in politics, provided, in open conversations, they are willing to acknowledge the ways any of these applications of religion might no longer work, or might not work in this

context. There is thereby an emphasis on humility in *practice* rather than in *person*. People can make whichever arguments they like, but the arguments do have to work.

The obvious response to such a pragmatic compromise is that it does not go far enough. For example, one of Habermas's sternest critics, Iris Marion Young, is certainly committed to democratic deliberation: she simply believes that publics must take account of group interests, often through specific mechanisms such as "group veto power regarding specific policies that affect a group directly" (2011: 184). However, privileging certain groups over others can sometimes lead to intersectional (Crenshaw 1991) problems that can penalize women of color (Karpowitz, Mendelberg and Shaker 2012). Similarly, others suggest that a lack of real-world equality makes an ideological commitment to conversational equality all but unrealizable (Fraser 1990: 63); for these critics, democratic deliberation is ironically anti-democratic inasmuch as it tends to exclude certain historically marginalized groups or populations from the discussions themselves. Even when such individuals can enter into the conversations, formal inclusion mechanisms are still often insufficient (Young 2001), and marginalized groups' arguments are accorded less respect and esteem, whether consciously or subconsciously (Sanders 1997).

These questions of group interests nearly always refer to historically marginalized communities; however, many conservative Christians believe they are unfairly marginalized in the United States and other countries they consider "militantly secular." Regardless of the empirical merits of the claim, religious groups might insist they also need special protections and privileges in the course of a conversation, thereby directly challenging the separations called for by both Rawls and Habermas and seemingly also undercutting the possibility for intellectual humility. However, as Iris Marion Young and others have shown, sometimes the best answer to the problems of deliberation is to remake the rules of deliberation using non-deliberative means. It is worth acknowledging that nearly everyone has certain hard-to-articulate non-negotiables they think are

worth protecting, including democracy itself and the protection of marginalized groups. As discussed earlier, there is no necessary reason to separate the religious and non-religious in this regard (Taylor 2007). However, an important distinction would be the degree to which anyone can separate non-negotiable *claims* from non-negotiable *sources*, as the former can more easily be established in a pluralistic politics than the latter. This does not mean that people must give up their non-negotiable sources, or even that they must translate its claims into “secular” claims. It is simply to say that claims can be shared as resources in ways we described above; it is harder to do so with entire sources. As such, the question of religious claims’ function becomes practical rather than categorical.

So, our first criticism of Dewey was that a religious critic would see it as unfair to prevent them giving religious reasons in deliberation, a problem he might resolve by emphasizing a pragmatic distinction between reasons that are not allowed and reasons that just will not work. A second criticism of Dewey is perhaps more damning, even if it is correctable with Durkheim’s help. While Dewey recognized that the “core of religion has generally been found in rites and ceremonies” (59), he generally fails to recognize these as anything except implicitly cognitive and discursive claims rather than as processes through which people are socialized into certain ways of understanding the world. Of course, Dewey recognizes the role of religion in socializing certain understandings of the good life; indeed, it was exactly because of this socialization that Dewey wanted to weaken the restrictive power of scripture, thereby allowing religious arguments about the good to be tested in the way that any argument would be. Yet even if Dewey could see the way that religion socialized and even if he also could pay a bit more attention to the *emotional* aspects of religion, he paid less attention to the specific role of *ritual*. Dewey was a Protestant after all, and he was responding primarily to Protestants: these were largely questions of theology and morality rather than liturgy and sacrament.

Yet what if Durkheim is right, and ritual is actually what matters? The move is not that far for Dewey to make. After all, he already acknowledges, with Durkheim, the importance of emotion in social and political life. He already recognizes the importance of community and physical co-presence, of sharing a sense of common identity before the deliberation can even happen. All that remains is for him to recognize the role of ritual life in democratic politics, even rational deliberation.

So what if speech thereby becomes a kind of liberal ritual, in exactly the sense Habermas describes in the sacralization of language? And what if that ritual takes on a kind of sacred sensibility, helping to maintain Dewey's "common faith"? This focus on ritual would help air out the Protestant dryness of Dewey's faith, and it would also help to show the way that the faith comes to live in the day-to-day, not only as emotional commitments, but as rooted in practices with sacred stakes.

Of course, the fact that something is a ritual does not necessarily mean it is right. Maybe certain kinds of speech are wrong, or maybe the kinds of speech we thought were wrong are actually okay. Maybe the things we thought were sacred are actually harmful, or just uninteresting. Dewey's faith in the democratic process allows us to push these questions forward. We are able to do so in part because of a confidence in human capability, but it is not only confidence. After all, if we were completely confident, we would need to change nothing. It is humility, as well, that drives Deweyan democracy. Rogers cites *Human Nature and Conduct* to open his first article, and it is worth repeating here:

When the future arrives with its inevitable disappointments as well as fulfillments, and with new sources of trouble, failure loses something of its fatality, and suffering yields fruit of instruction, not of bitterness. Humility is more demanded at our moments of triumph than those of failure. For humility is not caddish self-depreciation. It is the sense of our slight

inability even with our best intelligence and effort to command events; a sense of our dependence upon forces that go their way with our wish and plan (Dewey in Rogers 2008: 25).

To turn Niebuhr's maxim around in the service of his enemy: our humility makes deliberation possible and our hope makes deliberation necessary.

Yet this might all seem a bit too easy. After all, for those who hold to a revealed text and believe its maxims must be carried out, Dewey's understanding of religion is less a compromise than a frontal assault, insisting, as it does, that even the sacred should be subject to critique. And this is why Durkheim again becomes helpful, and the glimmers of Durkheim's theory of sociality are visible in Dewey's commitment to a middle way between dogmatic communitarianism and atomistic individualism (Rogers 2008).

As various scholars of deliberation have suggested (Ryfe 2004, Schneiderhan and Khan 2008, Thompspon 2008), to give and exchange reasons in a fair and egalitarian manner is not necessarily impossible, provided there are certain conditions beforehand, equality of interlocutors and openness to correction of course, but also, and more fundamentally, a commitment to the conversation itself, and to learning from the conversation. The challenge then shifts out of the realm of either religion or politics, instead showing potential interlocutors how we share certain common problems that make us, through this commonality, common citizens. The problem of religion and politics thereby shifts from an all or nothing binary forcing questions of the suitability of translation to a pragmatic series of practical solutions to the problems we all share, and the degree to which religious or non-religious actors can bring particular tools to our common table. Understood pragmatically, whether or not religion is fundamentally true is not really a question we as a deliberative democracy need to have: instead the question becomes whether or not this or that element of a religion is helpful in our common projects. Of course, religious politics here still has

the problem of translation, but not because of some fundamental misfit between religion and public deliberation but simply because other members of the public might not share these religious backgrounds, and the tool has to be proven to be effective to at least a majority of them.

The ground thereby shifts in two important ways. First, the religious and non-religious both are forced to recognize a kind of humility to the degree they all recognize a common problem they cannot at this moment fix. And second, both religious and non-religious are forced to develop a second kind of humility, in that even though they might firmly believe in the *rightness* of their commitments or claims, that is a separate question from whether their suggestions will *work*, both in the sense of eventual policy but, just as importantly, in the sense of convincing interlocutors. Solutions become practical rather than absolute, pragmatic rather than ontological. Yet that does not mean religion ceases to have a fundamental character for the religious: it is only that its elements can be shared and suggested within something just as fundamental, social life itself. A fusion of Durkheim and Dewey help us to recognize and reorient both our social existence and our politics to make this kind of “common faith” possible, that is, a mutual recognize that our problems are truly shared and therefore our solutions must be as well.

The next—and obvious—question is whether such recognition actually obtains, as so much of society seems committed to the maintenance of inequality and privilege. What if we actually do not agree that a certain kind of inequality or a certain lack of recognition is a problem? It is no coincidence that both Durkheim (2011) and Dewey were so concerned about political education, and in both cases the concern regards the sort of inculcation of something Durkheim might call the sacred, yet an immanent sacred rooted in an emotional commitment to democratic ideals. Such education is as important as ever, in schools of course, but most importantly in community organizations and organizing, in political campaigns and conversations, and even in academic fora like this article. For Dewey, we become socialized not through ideals downloaded into us wholesale,

but through *doing*, and in doing, through coming to understand our way of doing as a habitual way to understand the world and our place within it. The project of democracy is always and necessarily a gradual one: we become democrats not because of one amazing conversation but through the long steady work of doing democracy and educating others within it, both in and outside of discourse (Young 2001, 2011).

That commitment to education is at once arrogant and humble: arrogant in the sense that it assumes we can gradually convince a massively unequal world that democratic ideals are worthwhile, and humble in that we have no idea whether that education will work, and even if it does, what such a democracy would produce. Yet, as Dewey insists, we do have faith.

#### 4. Conclusion

Religion, I have argued, can be a hindrance, a resource, an evaluation, and a source for democratic politics, especially deliberative politics. Yet deliberation is only possible given a prior commitment to democratic equality and to the kind of humility that makes possible an acknowledgement someone else has a better answer. Religion can obviously prevent such humility, leading to an arrogant dogmatism that only one way of operating will do. Yet religion is not alone in insisting on certain non-negotiables, both through deliberation and through other, non-deliberative methods as well. What concerns Enlightenment thinkers from Kant down to Rawls and Habermas is less religion itself and more a dogmatic fealty to certain doctrines, unwilling to be moved by what they are unwilling to recognize is a better argument.

A fusion of Durkheim and Dewey helps us to think about these problems in a different way. First, we separate religious *claims* from religious *sources*, not banning religious claims per se but instead insisting on a basic pragmatic test: could it actually convince anyone? Second, we emphasize the importance of society itself, especially in its emotional, ritualistic sensibility, making political differences more a series of practical problems rather than a means of establishing social identities.

This is not to deny that many people's social identities are always already political, referred to by others, dismissively, as practical problems: look at late nineteenth century studies of "the woman problem" or "the Jewish question." It is simply to argue that to the degree that people can identify as a community first and a group of individuals working out politics second, then they will perhaps become more in tune with each other's recognition of the problems themselves. However, developing such a community with shared visions is no easy feat, and both Dewey and Durkheim insist on the importance of education, not only in schools, but also through activism, media, and many other means.

Indeed, as Iris Marion Young argues, an exchange of ideas can be more "disorderly" than standard accounts of deliberation, with "enraged and responsible democratic communication" such as "street demonstrations and sit-ins, musical works, and cartoons" (Young 2001: 688) alongside more staid approaches to politics. Young does not deny that deliberation matters—"the best democratic theory and practice will affirm them both" (Young 2001: 689)—yet she seems to imply that, given the grave injustices all around, activism is the more urgent and the more necessary. And, we might add, the more open to radically different ways to evaluate our common world. Religion provides one such evaluation, as well as a series of resources and even sources for democratic politics. Of course, religion might well be a hindrance as well. At any rate, the relationship of religion to politics does seem worth discussing.

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