
TAKING THE CHALLENGE OF FUNDAMENTALISM SERIOUSLY

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Abstract

Are democratic institutions to be confined to a liberal ‘neutrality’, especially when it comes to recognizing socially constructive values based upon religious commitments which are freely expressed by individuals in a democratic society? In recent decades, after the revival of militant religious movements with strong political agendas, this ‘neutrality’ has been somewhat reinforced. Indeed, this has yielded a certain polarity between the demand for a more radical secularization of the public space, on the one hand, and the fundamentalist language constructed upon the tenets of different religions, on the other hand. The main question which I intend to address is whether, notwithstanding this polarity, there is still a future for religiously inspired societal values that are congruous with a liberal-democratic order, and in particular with democratic values. More precisely, the question is whether the challenge of fundamentalism would be more adequately faced in Western democracies by a reasonable liberalization of the public discourse that may include some ‘religious’ values into the *overlapping consensus*, rather than by a secularistic censure of any reference to transcendence that may call into question the freedom of expression of individuals who still live under a sacred canopy. Thus, democratic values and institutions may possibly cohere with a reasonable expression of religious beliefs and values, provided that the latter do not violate J.S. Mill’s classic harm principle and do not convey millennial or messianic political goals.

Keywords: democratic values, religious values, secularization, public space, overlapping consensus

1. Introduction

The current resurgence of militant religious movements which share the millenarian political project to resacralize the world and their impact upon democratic values and institutions seem to be still understated by the academic scholarship. Although some prominent political science scholars such as Gabriel Almond, R. Scott Appleby and Emmanuel Sivan have undertaken a substantial research on religious fundamentalism in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attack, the results of which were published in the volume *Strong*

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Religion: Religious Fundamentalisms around the World [1], academic research on the issue is still largely overlooked, especially in the field of political theory [2]. In addition, opinion makers, policy makers and politicians often avoid using the term 'fundamentalism' because they consider it offensive to Muslims.

The result of this unintentional 'conspiracy of silence' around the issue seems to be that the challenge of fundamentalism is faced, as I shall argue, rather inadequately and anachronistically, notably by a secularist avoidance of religiously inspired values in the public discourse of liberal-democratic societies and in liberal-democratic institutions, which creates the background for a more radical secularization. Ironically, it is the very process of secularization conceived as a radical exclusion of religious beliefs and values from the public sphere that seems to trigger the most the phenomenon of modern fundamentalism.

It is a fact, however, that democratic institutions in Western-style societies are usually confined by a liberal 'neutrality' which deters in principle every public expression of religious values, thus favouring in fact a Rawlsian 'omission' from the *overlapping consensus* of reasons and values that derive from religious and metaphysical conceptions of the good. But, in accordance with the principles of democracy among which the freedom of expression is a crucial right, should not this Rawlsian procedure of avoidance be somewhat reconsidered? The first motivation to do so would be based on the democratic values that may require that individuals articulate their specific ways of self-understanding in the public space. In addition, there might be also practical reasons based on the fact that some values supported by the individuals' religious allegiances might prove to be socially constructive.

A particular question arisen by this paper is whether the inclusion of some religiously inspired values which are socially beneficial may lessen the hazardous polarity between a 'radical' secularization of the mainstream public discourse and the militant religious language based on a fierce antimodernist and antiseccular rhetoric. Could this provide, moreover, a suitable strategy for facing the challenge of religious fundamentalism today?

Fundamentalists strengthen their religious views and occasionally try to impose them through military weapons and political power because they perceive their main enemy, i.e. the modern secular state, as an omnipotent and omnipresent structure. Thus, they usually fear and, at the same time, mimic their enemy, seeking power of an indivisible and omnipotent kind. Fundamentalism is, consequently, a phenomenon that has emerged in the wake of the rise of the modern secular state and as such its consideration cannot be removed from the issue of the boundary between the sacred and the secular. Since this boundary is rather variable from one culture to another, I intend to focus here only on the Western model of liberal-democratic society in which the sacred is more explicitly privatized, and in which, on the other hand, democracy allows a larger freedom of expression.

2. The fundamentalist revival and the rationalist denial of religion

The dramatic September 11 terrorist attack against the United States and the succeeding terrorist bombings in Madrid and London have been the warning signs of a strong revival of militant religious movements in recent years. However, the tragic impact of these attacks may have produced a somewhat distorted image of fundamentalism, since it left the false impression that religious fundamentalism is primarily a Muslim phenomenon. In reality, the term ‘fundamentalism’ has been coined in Christianity, by the British and American Protestants who wrote the set of essays published around 1910 in twelve volumes under the title *The Fundamentals. A Testimony to the Truth*, with the intention to firmly re-establish the Orthodox bases of Christian faith.

Fundamentalist movements may emerge in all major religions [1, p. 6]. The religious militant canvas is quite complex, yet there are ‘family resemblances’ shared by many fundamentalist movements which do not have in common neither a country or a continent, nor a single host religion [1, p. 9]. One may consistently refer, accordingly, to a Christian fundamentalist influence over the Republican Party in the United States, or to the fundamentalist style of many rabbis in the haredi (ultra-Orthodox) communities, and should not insulate the application of the term only to Islamic militant groups, though Islam has indeed produced a particularly strong and violent form of fundamentalism, which still threatens to become a global phenomenon.

Yet, despite the visibility of fundamentalism today, especially in its Muslim form, the significance of the phenomenon is but rarely discussed as a challenge to the boundary between the sacred and the secular that was shaped by the rationalism of the Enlightenment and, in addition, to the very definition of the public space. Although the idea of a culture of ‘progress’ that would lead to growing secularization, scientific development and enhanced general welfare, with religion seen as an irretrievably fading tradition, does no longer reflect reality, the secularist mindset fastens even now the public discourse on ‘purely secular’ grounds and often treats religious beliefs as potential irrational dangers for the well-being of an enlightened humankind [1, p. 4]. This rather dogmatic rationalist tendency to marginalize religion from the public discourse seems, moreover, to have escalated in recent years, leading to a polarity between a secularistic urge for the privatization of religious beliefs in the Western-style societies, on the one hand, and an increasing discontent of the fundamentalists with such attempts to secularize even more politics, social life, and institutions, on the other hand.

The idea that religion is an indisputably private matter has thus grown on some rationalist assumptions of the Enlightenment that are no longer viable. In reality, far than becoming merely cultural ghettos rejected by an enlightened majority which masters through science and progress all difficulties and evils of the human life, religious communities have survived in spite of the positivistic aspirations of the Enlightenment. In many countries today, including the United States and Europe, many people still rely in making decisions on sources of

authority that derive from religious doctrines and sacred books. Moreover, as some scholars suggest, even the complex 'Church-State' relations have been often oversimplified, and the mainstream explanatory view of the influence of religious values over politics and law in the modern world, especially after the Westphalian settlement, has been reductive [3].

Gabriel Almond, Scott Appleby and Emmanuel Sivan assess the perpetuation of this simplifying explanatory tendency as a 'secular myopia' based on a defensive denial of the causal significance of religion in the contemporary world [1, p. 4]. If the Enlightenment expectations to thoroughly privatize religion have survived, they have been internalized especially by the secular elites, while the "silent majorities" in many countries still configure their daily routines upon the spiritual practices prescribed by religious traditions, and often do so quite "publicly" [1, p. 4]. At the same time, religious traditionalists could hardly harmonize their views with the notion of progress shaped by the Enlightenment culture, and hence might find more coherent explanations in the oversimplified ideologies offered by the market of fundamentalist movements.

3. Excluding socially constructive values drawn from religious sources?

Another consequence of the secular avoidance of the religion significance in the public spheres of life might be that some socially constructive, religiously inspired ethical values such as *compassion, charity, solidarity, mutual benefit, and interest for the common good* could be downplayed publicly, while antisocial values such as *selfishness, greediness, and moral indifference* might gain implicit or even explicit recognition.

The obvious conclusion that religious fanatics are prone to violence, which can be proved, for example, by showing that the suicide hijackers of September 11 actually believed in God and prayed for success even in an action which was supposed to end in massacre, does not invalidate the possibility that millions of people who believe in a transcendent reality that supernaturally governs their lives may share socially beneficial values that are grounded in their religious faith. Extremists usually express some distorted meanings of their religious faith based on a selective theology that is reinforced by some ideological emphases, yet they do not represent religious people in general, but only a minority with strong, simplistic convictions and a militant approach to the 'sacred' restructuring of modern secular institutions and societies.

It is true however, that fundamentalists and extremists are usually distressed not only by secular modernists, but also by moderate believers who are part of their own religious community [4]. For example, Catholic fundamentalists who deny the Second Vatican Council and keep the tradition of the Tridentine Mass firmly believe that the whole Catholic Church is misguided by the heretical principles asserted by that Council, especially on matters such as liturgical reform, ecumenism, freedom of conscience, supremacy of the Roman Catholic Church over other religions, and relations with Jews. Like most fundamentalists, they reject any dialogue with modernity, and view any dealings

with the current secularized world and the modern institutions as an implicit, yet dangerous derision of their own tradition. This rigid antisecularist position usually obstructs any trade-offs between fundamentalists and standard believers of the same denomination who are less inclined to fetishize their tradition, or are unwilling to re-enact it through a militant rejection of modern institutions.

Fundamentalists rebuff indeed compromises of every kind, since militant religious movements are structured according to the principles of authoritarian dominion and need to endorse absolutist doctrines in order to legitimize their radical stances. However, the attitude of standard religious believers may be different. Unlike fundamentalists, many reasonable believers in the truths revealed by the major religions may need to find some of their religious values which possess moral and social significance expressed to a certain extent in the public space and talked of in the public discourse. Examples as such may be the values entailed by the notion of ‘natural law’ that was used by medieval and early modern Christian theologians to support a human beings’ inherent sense of right and wrong that sustains a law of morality ‘written in the heart’ and testified by the conscience – even Kant’s notion of ‘the Moral Law’ relies on similar assumptions. Such an inherent law is supposedly discovered by reason, rather than by revelation. The values inspired by the natural law may prescribe, for example, a rational respect for human life, and compassion for and solidarity with human beings afflicted by natural or unnatural adversities.

Such values are by no means marginal for many people who share religious beliefs and, since they are of vital importance for the self-understanding of these individuals as social and moral beings who have intersubjective relations to other fellow human beings, and not only as ‘religious’ beings who construe themselves in relation to a transcendent reality, some forms of acceptance of these values in the public discourse of democratic societies would be needed. Besides, values like *compassion*, *solidarity* and *disinterestedness* may prove to be not only worthwhile per se, but also socially and economically beneficial, as we might infer, for instance, from an examination of the moral roots of the recent worldwide economic crisis [5]. As a consequence, the cost of excluding such values from the public space because of the secularist objections against their being ‘tarnished’ by religious commandments may prove larger than a rational acknowledgement of their socially beneficial worth.

4. Towards a more complex self-understanding of the social actors

”All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players”, as famously wrote Shakespeare in *As You Like It*. However, men and women are not merely functional players in a social, economic, and political system – they are also intelligent beings who need to interpret themselves and to continually reconstruct their subjective identity according to more complex criteria than the ones provided by the socio-political language.

The idea that the ‘religious identity’ of social actors should be entirely private, whereas in their ‘public roles’ they use social personas regulated by institutional norms and conventions, is thus untenable or, at least, insufficient. As I have already argued, some aspects of the so-called ‘religious identity’ may prove to be quite *social*, being related to interpersonal relationships which have an ethical dimension that, in the case of religious believers, is usually motivated by faith. Such aspects cannot be relegated to a peripheral identity without trying to ghettoize again religious communities and individual believers, in the rather dated spirit of the Enlightenment, and thus jeopardize also their religious freedom. Since the latter should also include a degree of recognition of an individual’s religious identity in the public sphere, such as for example his or her eating-habits or way of dressing, one may reasonably ask why the public space of democratic institutions could not abide to some extent also *moral* and *social values* that are crucial for that identity.

Religious freedom is a politically significant fundamental right that enables both the freedom of religious observance and the coexistence of a plurality of religions on the same territory. Yet, religious pluralism, although based on undeniable theological and cultural differences, may not dismiss the possibility that some moral and social values with religious resonance, such as *compassion* and *charity* for example, be also shared in multiethnic and multireligious societies *on equally religious grounds*. In other words, religious pluralism does not undermine the possibility of inter-religious dialogue, and does not necessarily mean an incommensurability of all religious values, and a probability of conflict between different religious groups.

Of course, *altruism* and *compassion* may also be justified on secular ethical bases, and are not intrinsically religious – some people may substantiate them, for example, on the basis of a rationally construed ‘natural law’ or on a conventional law instituted through human agreement, as in the social contract theories. Nonetheless, this possibility should not deny the right of religious believers to profess the same values on religious grounds, according to their freedom of conscience, and to do this publicly. In other words, in a democratic order people should be allowed, according to their freedom of religion and freedom of expression, to express more publicly their complex self-understanding, which may also include their religious beliefs and values.

5. Towards a liberalization of the overlapping consensus

Rawls’s method of devising a morally significant *overlapping consensus* on principles of justice notoriously recommends that different cultural or religious groups should refrain from public or political disputes over fundamental questions that rely on ideological, metaphysical or religious arguments, in order to avoid conflicts that may affect political stability. Rawls’ avoidance of reasons that derive from comprehensive conceptions of the good has been subject, however, to various criticisms. One of them is that, despite his own claim, the idea of an *overlapping consensus* is superfluous to or

indistinguishable from that of *modus vivendi* [L. Hartie, *Overlapping Consensus: Incoherent or Superfluous*, http://www.academia.edu/181155/Overlapping_Consensus_Incoherent_or_Superfluous, accessed on 16 February 2014.], the latter being explained by Rawls as a strategic agreement reached by parts for merely pragmatic and potentially unprincipled purposes [6]. Whether or not this critique is defensible, it shows however that a Rawlsian *overlapping consensus* is insufficient, especially when there is a political necessity to cope with views that are entirely different from the liberal core sustained by Rawls as the only acceptable prudential playing field of politics and public deliberation in liberal-democratic societies. The Rawlsian consensus is based in fact on an avoidance of ‚comprehensive views’ that at first seems too permissive, but is nonetheless too restrictive, since it eludes from the public and political sphere any reason that is not strictly compatible with the dominant Western understanding of liberal democracy [7].

Even more liberal-minded people who are religiously committed, such as liberal Catholics for example, may be embarrassed by such strictures applied to the public field of deliberation. They may agree in principle with the fact that modern democracy is equidistant from positions held by faith and non-faith communities, and that we live in a world of a Rawlsian *overlapping consensus*. However, as José Casanova [8] and Charles Taylor have predicted, religious discourse will be inescapably present in the public square since democracy requires that citizens use a language that is most meaningful to them. Even if citizens may tactfully express their religious beliefs and values in a manner that is more familiar to others, one cannot compel them to do so without disregarding their freedom of expression [9].

To sum up the argument, since on the one hand the Rawlsian *overlapping consensus* seems too restrictive even for liberal-minded people with religious loyalties, and on the other hand people in a democratic society need to express publicly their own values, even if such values acquire meaning by a reference to transcendence, the remedy of this difficulty might be a liberalization of the *overlapping consensus* that could still be somewhat restricted by the classic harm principle formulated by J.S. Mill [10]. In other words, socially constructive values that are inspired by a religious commitment, such as *compassion*, *solidarity* and *interest for the common good* could be more welcome in the public square and in the public space of democratic institutions, even in a society whose mindset is shaped by Rawlsian principles. In fact, Rawls himself supports values like *fraternity*, *mutual benefit*, and *shared wellbeing* in *A Theory of Justice* [11], which shows a preference for the ‚good’ that lessens, in a rather humane vein, his self-professed prioritization of the ‚right’ over the ‚good’. Such values should not be, of course, enforced as religious commandments over non-faith communities or individuals, but they should be however freely expressed publicly and be accepted in a democratic society as part of the self-understanding of people who live under a sacred canopy, notwithstanding the progressive assurances of science and modernity. Otherwise, although these people may not reject the Rawlsian common core, they may perceive its

strictures as a secularistic censure of any reference to transcendence. Such a censure is of course hardly consistent with either the freedom of religion, or the freedom of expression professed through the liberal-democratic creed, and specified by Rawls himself in his list of the basic liberties that are to be embodied in constitutional principles [11].

A preference for ‚socially constructive’ religious values that are to be abided by the public sphere may rise of course the Schmittian question of *quis iudicabit*. Nonetheless, the priority given to such values may not be *a priori* supported on infallible grounds, but could leave enough room for rational analysis and further corroboration with empirical realities. Furthermore, this needs not entail also a perfectionist approach to politics that would favour some (religious) conceptions of the good life over others to the extent to which it could enforce them by the law. Such a perfectionist state-policy would be illegitimate and incompatible with a moral pluralism that allows the coexistence of many conceptions of the good. In a democratic public space, the ‚socially constructive’ moral values inspired by religion may need indeed *recognition* at the level of the communal debate, but this does not amount to a case for supporting such values through a perfectionist state-policy.

6. Mitigating fundamentalism by allowing religious values in the public space?

If my argument so far was correct, a reassessment of the boundary between the sacred and the public in liberal-democratic societies and democratic institutions would be a strategy to consider religion and its role in the social and political life with less reductive methods than in the dominant secularistic explanation of religion inherited from the Enlightenment culture of ‘progress’. But could this be also a way to mitigate the fundamentalist disapproval of secular modernity?

Since the main enemy of fundamentalist movements is the modern secular state, it could seem so, yet the simplicity of such an answer may be deceptive. Some fundamentalists react harshly to the ‘inner secularization’ of their own religion to the same extent as to the irreligious traits of the so-called ‘profane’ world, i.e. the modern state and the modern institutions. If unshakable religious tradition was at stake, even a change of emphasis made by their own religious leaders, which also invites dialogue with secular and non-faith individuals, would be unwelcome by fundamentalists and criticized as an ‘heresy’.

First, a broader explanatory view of modernity which does justice to the causal significance of religion even after the Westphalian settlement would be needed for a more accurate description of the interplay between religion, politics, and law in modernity [3]. Such a reassessment of modernity could be given more substance by a reconsideration of the famous assertion of Nietzsche, “God is dead”, that rises further questions about the demise of the supernatural in the modern world and about its significance [12]. If such analyses might prove that even in the modern world the sacred is still meaningful, the object of

Manichean fundamentalist political projects, which radically reject the modern world and the democratic institutions because of their disregard for religious values, could be defeated.

But the goal of such a re-examination of modernity from the point of view of the persistence of the sacred would not be of course to engage in yet another messianic project of liberating mankind through a new millennialism, such as the one shared by global fundamentalisms, and unquestionably also by Marxism [13]. It would be rather the more modest goal to acknowledge the limits of the human condition, and to assume more moderate purposes of actual political projects which could be more attuned to the narrow, changeable, and imperfect circumstances of politics than large utopian or millennial designs.

So, a reasonable acceptance of some religious values in the public sphere does not mean to endorse absolutist messianic projects that are to be enforced upon people with different beliefs and values. Totalitarian-like projects rather characterize the fundamentalisms that aim, very much like Marxism, at 'changing the world', by blending the sacred with politics, and by seeking an omnipotent and omnipresent secular power which might resacralize the world. In other words, if the sacred is entirely denied as a meaningful reality with causal influence upon the decisions of many people who live in the modern world, by a 'defence mechanism' used by secularist elites [1, p. 4], one can possibly assist to 'a return of the sacred' in militant political shapes, as it has occurred already in the terrorist attacks of the Islamic global fundamentalist movement Al-Qaeda.

Accordingly, if fundamentalists are not likely to be discouraged in their militant motives by straightforward attempts to bargain the limits between the secular and the sacred, the target of their hostility could be somewhat altered by abiding more religious beliefs and values in the public discourse of Western democratic societies. Thus, in indirect ways, a violent 'return of the sacred' in politics could be inhibited by acknowledging that the sacred is not only a purely private reality, and by allowing some of the values related to it to become more publicly expressed. This would not be meant to upset a pluralistic liberal-democratic order, which is to be respected also through the protection of religious pluralism. On the contrary, its aim is to leave room for the freedom of expression of the 'silent majorities' that are often more willing to refer to the sacred in their own self-understanding than the secularistic elites are disposed to admit, in line with the Enlightenment progressivist myth.

7. Values and 'liberal neutrality'

T. Nagel and J. Raz have already examined in a critical light the possibility of a strict liberal neutrality such as the one promoted by the Rawlsian political theory [14]. Even if we do not wish to endorse their particular criticisms, it is clear that promoting a purely neutral state-politics, which would also provide a model for the neutrality of the public space negotiated in liberal-democratic institutions, is a rather unattainable goal. In reality, Rawls' own theoretical device for defending 'liberal neutrality' is based on a certain

conception of the good, which is the idea that stability matters and that political neutrality is more likely to preserve it in a democratic order than an open competition between many conceptions of the good in the public square. Nonetheless, if this concern for political neutrality is to be adopted as a wide norm in all public areas, the result is, among others, an avoidance of the public expression of religiously-inspired values that may undermine the idea of democracy and could be seen as a secularist understatement of the sacred, and of the causal influence of religion upon individuals in favour of a secularist conception of the good. This could be felt, especially in a social order governed by democratic rules and inspired by democratic values, as an illegitimate constraint that would narrow not only the freedom of belief of traditionalists and fundamentalists, but also the one of the standard religious believers.

Besides, Rawls' interest is not only to vouchsafe political stability, but also to envisage the conditions for a social role of justice. In this respect, Rawls explicitly prefers a conception of the good, by his assumption that people in the original position would be keen to adopt such principles of justice as to ensure the benefit of the less advantaged members of society [11, p. 16-17]. Indeed, by emphasizing *mutual benefit*, *fraternity* and *social justice* in his moral-political theory, Rawls comes very close to the religiously inspired socially constructive values to which I have already referred – values such as *compassion*, *solidarity* and *interest for the common good*. If the commitment to such values does not necessarily depend upon the adherence to religious conceptions of the good, it may however be sustained also through the 'religious' identity of some individuals, provided that the latter often involves social and moral responsibilities towards other people.

8. Conclusions

I have tried to argue for a liberalization of the Rawlsian *overlapping consensus* that may allow some religiously inspired values to be expressed in the public space and be openly talked of in democratic institutions, without interfering however with the pluralistic principles that lie beneath a liberal-democratic order. On the contrary, since freedom of expression and religious freedom are rights that are fully recognized in a democratic society, and the freedom of individuals may allow them to have a more complex self-understanding than the one envisaged by the Enlightenment secular explanations of modernity, it seems reasonable to accept also a 'sacred' dimension of the identity of individuals in contemporary societies. This could also be, as I tried to argue, an indirect way to inhibit the motivation of militant religious groups and individuals to reaffirm 'the sacred', which they perceive as wholly underrepresented in modern, secular states and institutions, through violent means. Since the dilemmas of modern individuals were far from being sorted out by the progressivist explanations that treat religion only as epiphenomenal, and since, on the other hand, religion has sometimes returned, in modern societies, under the disguise of ambitious messianic political projects, perhaps religion

should still be allowed more explicitly a legitimate role in the self-understanding of modern-day actors of social and institutional life, in current democratic societies.

As for the probability that strong religious reasons of some individuals may undermine democracy and the right of other people to have different conceptions of the good, this may be prevented by not allowing such reasons to be enforced by state-policy, since the latter should reasonably respect moral pluralism. Furthermore, a constraint may be placed upon the content of such reasons, by examining the extent to which different religious conceptions of the good with public claims are able to preserve Mill's classic harm principle, and by critically assessing the degree to which they might have the messianic ambition to 'liberate mankind' through totalizing ideologies or millennial political projects. Critical reason is still, as Popper have argued, the only alternative to violence so far discovered, that is to say also an alternative to the militant religious violence.

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