CIVIC VIRTUES AND FUNCTIONS OF RELIGION IN PUBLIC LIFE

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Abstract

The article belongs to the area of theory of citizenship since it deals with the virtues and factors needed for working of liberal democracy. It pays special attention to the place and functions of religion in public life. In the first part the authors explain the importance of civic virtues for working of democracy. They especially stress the importance of civility, capacity to object the centres of power, and virtue of public reason which they call also a dialogic virtue. In the second part, they present some constraints concerning the place of religion in public life. Despite these constraints they argue that total exclusion of religious beliefs from public debate is wrong. They agree with the exclusivists that religious beliefs and reasons must not be used for justification but they allege several other functions that they may and should perform in public discussion. Therefore they refuse extreme exclusivism and defend moderate exclusivism.

Keywords: liberal, democracy, analysis, religious, belief

1. Civic virtues, dialogue and liberal democracy

David Herbert distinguishes three main types of ethical theory: consequential, deontological and virtue ethics. He gives three reasons why virtue ethics deserves attention by someone dealing with the analysis of policy: "(i) in contrast to alternatives, it is agent-centered and offers dynamic models of agent – environment interaction, and hence, potentially, offers greater possibility for a dialogue with social sciences; (ii) other approaches have serious shortcomings, especially when used in isolation, and (iii) it may be constructively combined with other approaches to provide a more holistic approach to ethics." [1]

The present article partly belongs to the area of theory of citizenship. Theory of citizenship deals with virtues and activities of citizens of democracies needed for prosperity of those democracies. We will deal especially with the modern pluralistic liberal democracies, which are characterized with the respecting of two central values: equality and freedom, which includes equality in basic political power. Theory of citizenship became to flourish in nineties of

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the 20th century. Some historical events - for instance the fall of communist regimes in the Soviet Union and European socialist countries and the subsequent problems with establishing true democracy in those countries - and developments in the theory itself have contributed to the awareness that democratic society cannot flourish if its citizens lack certain virtues [2]. Virtues and identities of citizens are important and independent factors of democratic government. Not only the basic structure (constitutional rights, procedures of practical decision, social institutions), but citizens who act in those institutions are also important: their identity and action (their responsibility, their attachments, their roles), their capacity to trust, their readiness to act as a part of a whole, their sense of justice. The passive acceptance of civic rights must be substituted for or upgraded by active exercise of civic virtues and of responsibility.

Virtue is a character trait that significantly influences person's conduct. It supplies a person in the wide variety of contexts with the proper reason for their action and with a motivation to do it for proper reason [3]. Civic virtue is related to the contribution of flourishing of a society. In the context of liberal democracy, civic virtue is related to promotion of freedom and autonomy of citizens. It essentially includes virtuous participation in public debate. Accordingly, civic virtue has two moments: 1) capacity to listen to the other, 2) offering of adequate reasons for our claims. These reasons must be publicly comprehensible and evidentially adequate, especially when the supported law or policy will restrict the freedom of other citizens [3]. These reasons must be understandable and in a sense acceptable for people belonging to different cultures, religions or worldviews in the society, acceptable for them as equal and free people. Civic virtue requires an effort directed to distinguishing between public and private, and effort of empathy in relation to relevant others [2, p. 407]. There are of course many problems concerning exercise of this virtue. For instance, distinguishing between public and private, or that we run short of adequate public reasons understandable generally to all. In the last case, we witness a conflict situation (for instance in case of abortion). According to Kymlicka, the right civic virtuous reaction to such a conflict situation, common to modern morally heterogeneous societies, is an honourable compromise [2, p. 407-408]. However, the participation in public debate is crucial for realizing of deliberative democracy.

The theory of citizenship distinguishes several different (kinds of) virtues, but we must at the same time point out that those virtues are in fact strongly intertwined and mutually dependent. Bearing this in mind we may distinguish and stress three virtues as especially needed for modern (deliberative) democracy [2, p. 406-408]: a) civility (supports nondiscrimination), b) opposing and rising objections to political authority and control of the elected representatives (we are politically responsible for them), c) participation in public debate enabled by the virtue of public reason. Closely related to these virtues is the virtue of proper use of (in)tolerance, the factual carrying out of which itself presupposes an adequate public debate of quality [4].

The virtue of public reason maybe most saliently includes some features of civic virtue that we have already mentioned above: the capability to listen and to put one's own views, aspirations and demands in a language, which is understandable to all concerned parties at issue, active deliberation and participation in public debate, true communication and dialogue with others etc. It is a condition for fair social cooperation among citizens in the Rawlsian sense [5, 6] in modern societies, which are very heterogeneous regarding the worldviews of their citizens.

Dialogue is an essential moment of the virtue of public reason. That is why we can call it also dialogic virtue and why this virtue is so important today - because more than anything, the modern world, full of potentially even fatal tensions and conflicts, needs true dialogue between opposing parties. Dialogue is not only verbal communication, but it includes more, and it is very old and primitive communication between persons [7]. According to Janez Juhant, it is the basic form of human being together [8]. We cannot exhaust dialogue verbally, and the same it is true for virtue. They both surpass rules, principles, law-like description, knowledge that (as distinguished from knowledge how), etc. They are deeper than that; they apply directly to characters of persons. Without sharing some common virtues, true dialogue is very hard, almost impossible. But genuine dialogue is at the heart of every true community, of every true democracy, of every really free human society. For those reasons, it seems to us that deeper understanding of social reality is impossible without serious considerations of virtues and of applying of virtue ethics approach. We try to pay attention to some fruitful line of thinking in that direction. Our specific aim is to reflect on ways to achieve moral liberal pluralistic democracy.

Active citizenship is very attractive in general. Right politicians and left parties as well appeal to it. 'Civility' refers to the way of our treatment of persons who are not close to us. It is an extension of non-discrimination for without it, it is not possible to assure equal possibilities for all citizens in civil society. Every theory and policy that cares about democratic legitimacy and social justice should especially care for the virtue of public reason in political life, and for the virtue of civility in civil society. Without those virtues, neither justice nor stability in liberal democracy can be realized.

We would like to be treated as partisans of virtue ethics approach. But, as already mentioned above, virtue ethics can be combined with other approaches. It is a matter of priority of virtues to exercise the virtue ethic approach which does not require the denial of importance of any principles. Principles are important for functioning of society, because they enable us to predict the behaviour of people in society and help people to deal with situations. But they should not be understood as absolute or primary. They should be understood as formulating prima facie duties in David Ross' sense of the phrase. Robert Audi gives a useful clarification of Rossian conception of a prima facie duty. He writes: "In *The Right and the Good* Ross proposed, as fundamental both to philosophical ethics and to everyday life, a now famous list of prima facie duties: duties of fidelity (promise-keeping and also honesty, conceived as

fidelity to one's word) and reparation, of justice and gratitude, or beneficence and self-improvement, and of non-injury. In calling these duties prima facie, Ross meant to make at least two points: positively, that each duty indicates a kind of moral reason for action and, negatively, that even when we acquire such a duty, say by making a promise, the act in question need not be our final duty, since a competing duty, for instance to attend a sick child, might override the original one. Overridability of a prima facie duty does not imply that it ever lacks *moral weight*." [9, p. 22]

2. Religion in public life - principles and constraints

In liberal democracy, the right stance toward religion is not out-dated excluding of religion from all public life [10]. That, we think, is clear enough. But there should be set some constraints to religious discourse in public debate, in particular to what reasons may be used in public debate concerning religion, especially when certain claims support policy that restrains freedom of citizens. Audi [3, p. 42-47, 86-100, 135-139, 173-177, 193, 202-208; 11] formulated a set of useful principles adequate for liberal democracy. The most central of them are the following:

The principle of secular rationale says that a citizen in liberal democracy has a prima facie obligation not to support any law or public policy restricting human freedom or conduct unless he/she has some adequate secular reason for its support. The reason must be adequate from the point of view of above mentioned public comprehensibility and acceptability [11].

The principle of secular motivation says that in a virtuous person adequate normative reasons also motivate the action they indicate. One should abstain from the support of some public policy or law, unless one is not sufficiently motivated by some secular reason [11].

Why is the principle of secular rationale not sufficient, why does the second principle matter?

"From the point of view of virtue ethics, at least, it does matter. Insofar as the advocacy in question or other public behaviour is supposed to be action *from virtue*, we should look not just at what kind of act it is and what can be said for it abstractly, but also at how it is grounded in the agent's *character*. Just as Kant distinguished acting merely in conformity with duty and acting *from* duty, and Aristotle distinguished – as any virtue theorist should – actions that *express* virtue from those not virtuously performed but merely 'in the right state', i.e. of the right type, we should distinguish actions from civic virtue and actions merely in conformity with it." [11, p. 163]

The principle of Theo-ethical equilibrium: a person possessing civic virtue should in matters of political choice or morality on which religious consideration appropriately bears, seek for an adequate equilibrium between those considerations and relevant secular standards. This is the equilibrium between person's secular ethical considerations and her/his religious views where both are mutually adequately connected, motivationally and intellectually, consistent,

coherent and balanced. Even if we cannot reach the equilibrium on moral matter, it is possible to reach it on socio-political issue, for instance, whether to prohibit abortion or not [11].

Audi suggests two further principles concerning the institutional dimension of civic virtue: the *principle of ecclesiastical political neutrality*: churches have prima facie obligation to abstain from supporting candidates for public office, or advocating for laws or policies restricting human conduct. The principle applies not only to churches as institutions but also to individual acting as representatives of these institutions. The second is the *principle of clerical political neutrality*: clergy (as individuals) has a prima facie duty to take into account the distinction between their private political views and their views as clergy, to prevent political views from dominating their professional activity and abstain officially, as clergy, to support some policy or law restricting human conduct. With some exceptions Audi suggests political neutrality as a prima facie reasonable stance of a great many institutions in general, especially those intended to serve to a large pluralistic public [11].

3. Moderate exclusivism as the right option

Audi's principles require completion and refinement in the sense of a more precise specification of the use of religious beliefs and arguments in public debate since their different interpretations and applications are possible. The above formulations of Audi's principles could be interpreted as preventing religious beliefs from being used (almost) in any public debate in any way. But this position is wrong. Therefore, in the last part of the article, we will present Martin Breul's position, which differentiates various functions of religious beliefs and arguments in public debate. Such a differentiation makes possible an appropriate assessment of their place in public debate.

One of the central issues in the discussion about the relationship between religion and the democratic public is the question of the legitimacy of the use of religious beliefs and arguments in political debates. The question is whether religious beliefs and arguments are permissible in the public debates of a pluralistic society. Is it not morally disputable that we can - in the public debate on the justification of collectively binding norms – state or use religious beliefs as possible and appropriate justification for such norms? Our opinions can differ widely, and the question arises whether the use of religious beliefs and arguments in public debate is a legitimate element of religious freedom and perhaps even an indispensable part of a vital democratic culture, or such beliefs and arguments – which can always be just particularisticaly justified or sound - are in an undue manner transposed into generally binding norms. Breul calls the first position inclusivism, the second exclusivism [12]. The last places restrictions on religious or other overarching beliefs and doctrines. Obviously, a prudent position on this issue is the key guideline for resolving, or at least alleviating, the religious political conflicts of modern society.

Breul's thesis is that in the debate on the admissibility of religious arguments and beliefs in public discussion, a third, intermediate standpoint is possible. This position is called moderate exclusivism [12]. Moderate exclusivists claim that, on the one hand, it is essential that we insist on the ideal of neutral justification. Only justified political norms are legitimate, as they are justified by reasons that can be understood and accepted by all those concerned by the particular issue. This is the exclusivist element of moderate exclusivism. However, this insistence does not imply any requirement that religions should remain solely in the private sphere, since, apart from justification, there are many other possible functions that religious beliefs can perform in public discourse (moderate element). By taking such a standpoint, it should first of all be avoided foreclosure and flat-rate exclusion and discrimination of religious argumentation in general, and on the other hand, the unfounded hegemony of this or that world view majority, which is allowed by the unrestricted tolerance and acceptance of religious beliefs and demands that are not subject to any cogent judgment on the basis of (religiously neutral) rational criteria.

Breul listed five functions and reasons for the thesis that religious beliefs can play legitimate function in the public debate of a plural and democratic society [12, p. 499-501]. Moreover, he claims that those functions are necessary for such society. In any case, this is not the function of justification, about which he agrees with extreme exclusivists that religious beliefs can't perform. The legitimate functions are: 1) religious beliefs can play the role of motivational reason, 2) another reason for the need for public expression of religious beliefs relates to the reluctance of some regarding the possibility of translating the content of religious beliefs into non-religious, secular language. According to Breul, the public is a critical and discursive process for coordinating and organizing common behaviour and life. If this is the case, then religious beliefs should not be excluded from the public in advance. It they are limited to the private area, then there is no chance and no opportunity at all to check the availability of their content and parts that are of interest to social debate and for their translation into a generally acceptable and comprehensible language. For this reason, if we want to be at the postsecular level, we must reject the extremely exclusivist requirement of the privacy of religion and allow the presence of religious arguments in the public, but their defenders must be aware of the epistemic limitations of these arguments [12, p. 499]. 3) The third reason for the presence of accessible religious reasons in public debate is the consideration of minorities [12, p. 499-500]. For many minorities, it is often the only way to explain their concerns, reservations, expressions in religious language, or through religiously coined or substantiated objections. Religious justifications can serve as (initial) alternatives for generally acceptable justifications in which they can be (later) translated. The reason for such an allowance is not the patronage of cultural diversity, but the desire to broaden the scope of democratic public debate, both in terms of content and in terms of possible participants (including minorities from the periphery). 4) Religious arguments may serve as an additional justification in addition to arguments

based on generally acceptable reasons. Thus, various dictatorial orientations or obvious wrongs can also be criticized from religious points of view. In such case, religious arguments are not decisive, but they can give more weight to a certain position. The exclusion of religious argumentation from public debate can lead to the creation of a public space that is occupied by various extremists who, in public debate, introduce false religious arguments that benefit their interests. In recent years, the influence of the religious extreme right and evangelical fundamentalists in the public has greatly increased in the United States [13]. 5) In stable disagreement environments that require extensive compromises, a link to religious ideas may be necessary [12, p. 501]. Let's take an example of the abortionists and their religious opponents. Since we cannot expect to reach a consensus on this issue among them, the only solution to this situation is the position of reaching a compromise that both sides can live with and which will enable the reconciliation between the two sides. But if we want to achieve such a compromise, we must first find out what constitutes valuable criteria and concepts of concrete potential partners for the desired compromise so that they can be taken into account in the process of achieving the compromise. This can only be achieved if a religious party can also explain its views in public debate and if its views are taken into account in public discourse.

Finally, we need to clarify the general availability, and general acceptability of religious beliefs and reasons as a necessary condition for their use in public discourse. Availability and acceptability must be clearly distinguished. We think that undoubtedly, the general availability of religious beliefs and reasons is a prerequisite for their use in public debate. But this condition religious beliefs and reasons certainly fulfil. Therefore, their 'expulsion' from the use in public debate is not justified. On the other hand, general acceptance is not a prerequisite for functioning in public debate, but just for justification. It is clear that religious beliefs are not generally acceptable, and therefore they cannot serve justification. However, we repeat, contrary to the opinion of some, they are generally accessible. This is clear from the analysis of the composition of religious beliefs that Breul did for the very reason that he would substantiate his claim that religious beliefs can legitimately perform functions in public debate.

The main point of his epistemological analysis is that in religious beliefs we must distinguish two parts: content - or a propositional or cognitive part - that is accessible, and act - or a regulatory part - that is not accessible. The cognitive accessibility of religious beliefs enabled by their cognitive or propositional part is sufficient to ensure that religious beliefs and reasons can play roles in public debate, has put forward Breul. Let's take a closer look at his analysis now.

The first conceptual distinction with which Breul begins his clarification, and which takes place within the framework of the Kantian theory of practical reasonable faith, is the distinction between opinion, '*Meinen*', knowledge '*Wissen*' and faith '*Glauben*'. We speak about an opinion when one holds something to be true, but this is a bare holding-true '*Für-wahr-Halten*'. It is not

based on any reasons that would be sufficient, neither objectively nor subjectively, for this belief. On the other hand, knowledge is objectively certain, on the knowledge of an autonomous mind based holding-true. The beliefs of faith are neither completely ungrounded nor are they the result of a purely autonomous mind, but it is the third form of knowledge. Breul claims – referring to Kant [14] - that faith, understood as a practical reasonable faith, is by no means contrary to the reason, but it is rather a grounded trust [12, p. 491]. It is true that grounded trust is not an objective certainty still it is accessible for reasonable grounding. Breul's analysis of religious beliefs, which has decisive implications for the role of religious beliefs in public discourse, refers to this distinction in human capacities. The cognitive elements of faith include content - or in other terms material - beliefs about the world and the interpretation of the world immanent events. Regulatory elements imply practice involving the whole person that implies the person's religious attitude [12, p. 492].

In referring to Augustin, contents and concrete intellectual beliefs of faith can be defined as *fides quae creditur* (the faith which is believed), and religious attitude as *fides qua creditur* (the faith by which it is believed) [Aurelius Augustinus, *De Trinitate*, XIII, 2, 5, https://www.augustinus.it/latino/trinita/ index2.htm, accessed August 11, 2018; 15]. While the first is visible because it is about the things about which it is said that they are, were or will be, the second is in the souls of the believers and it is visible only to them. The first is common to them and is in this sense general, the second is individual, one faith only by kind, but not by number. Therefore, while *fides quae* contains the contents of faith, i.e. the elements of faith that can be propositionally described and grasped, *fides qua* denotes the act of faith, that is, a practical (individual) carrying out of faith [12, p. 492]. *Fides quae* can also be termed as 'doxastic faith' which has the following basic form: 'I believe that p'. *Fides qua* can be termed 'fiduciary faith', faith based on trust. Its basic structure is 'I believe in p'. More recently John Dewey distinguished between *believing in* and *believing that* [16]. For example, on the one hand we can believe in democracy, various (other) ideals, etc., on the other, for example, that Rome is the capital of Italy, that Edgar Allan Poe was born in 1809 ... To believe in something requires content, but this content is not just information [17].

In modern terminology, a similar distinction is put in terms of *faith* and *belief* [12, p. 492]. *Faith* means that every religious belief is accompanied by some act of faith, that is, the decision for a religion that firstly, in its origin, is not rationally founded. On the contrary, belief refers to the cognitive understanding of the propositionally marked religious beliefs. Both faith and belief are essential components of religious beliefs, which means that one without the other cannot exist if we are talking about authentic, genuine and nontruncated religious beliefs. It is important that the differences between these two parts of religious beliefs do not overlap to the extent that one of these constituents is isolated and conceptually removed from the original epistemic dual structure of religious beliefs [12, p. 492]. If a belief is nothing but blind faith, without any material content, it is not sensible to talk about true religious

beliefs. It is neither reasonable to reduce religious beliefs to bare holding-true, which, however, is trivial for practical life. We are not fair toward religious beliefs if we reduce them only to cognitive elements. The above findings can explain some of well-known facts: for example, only with rational arguments we can convince barely any non-believer to start believing, or that religious people, despite (first) failing to respond to the critique of (their) religion, persist in their own faith [12, p. 493; 18]. It is also pointless to reduce the sentences of faith to their regulatory elements, since these sentences inevitably contain certain substantive religious beliefs that require at least an intersubjective, i.e. not just a private validity.

From the above analysis of religious beliefs, it follows that these are, at least partly (their cognitive part), accessible for discursive consideration or discussion. In any case, it is not true that religious statements are closed or inaccessible for mind or even opposed to it, and that they cannot be understood by non-believers or those who believe otherwise, and that they cannot understand their cognitive content and reflect on it. This would be contrary to the cognitive feature of religious beliefs. On the other hand, we must bear in mind that religious beliefs are not identical to the autonomous beliefs of reason. They are irreducibly rooted in life practice. For that reason in order for one religious belief to become our own, more than just cognitive understanding is needed [19-21]. We can say that religious beliefs can fully meet the condition of intersubjectivity, but nevertheless, because of their composition, do not fulfil the condition of general acceptance [22-24].

Acknowledgment

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