

# Contexts of the Political Role of Religion: Civil Society and Culture†

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In this Article I want to suggest that recent discussions of the role of religious arguments in debates about public policy sometimes rest on oversimplified presuppositions. The discussion often seems polarized between two opposing camps. On one side are those who hold that it is appropriate for citizens to appeal directly to their religious convictions in advocating positions on policy issues. On the other side are those who hold that appeal to religious beliefs is always inappropriate in a liberal democratic society. Though many of the participants in this discussion hold views that are considerably more complex than either of these two positions, I think that stating the alternatives this way can help illuminate certain aspects of the debate that I want to call into question. Formulating the matter this way points to a tendency to assume that the relation of religion and politics is governed by just two variables — religious convictions on the one hand and recommendations about policy or law on the other. It further suggests that the question of whether religion should have a public role in society is identical with the question of whether either the advocacy or the justification of public policies should be based directly on religious convictions.

I will argue that the debate needs to be framed in a different way.

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† This Article recasts and develops ideas presented in several of my previous writings. See generally David Hollenbach, S.J., *Afterword: A Community of Freedom*, in *CATHOLICISM AND LIBERALISM: CONTRIBUTIONS TO AMERICAN PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY* (R. Bruce Douglass & David Hollenbach, S.J., eds., 1994); David Hollenbach, S.J., *Fundamental Theology and the Christian Moral Life*, in *FAITHFUL WITNESS: FOUNDATIONS OF THEOLOGY FOR TODAY'S CHURCH* 167-84 (Leo J. O'Donovan and T. Howland Sanks eds., 1989); David Hollenbach, S.J., *Religion and Political Life*, 52 *THEOLOGICAL STUD.* 87 (1991).

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Religion is not simply a set of convictions that one should or should not invoke in political debate. It is a considerably more dynamic and multidimensional reality than the term "convictions" might suggest. And political debate is not simply argument about whether to adopt or reject certain policies. There are, of course, many ways to demarcate the sphere to which the term "political" can be applied. But if we agree that the political sphere encompasses all human activities that occur in the public life of society, then it is surely a mistake to limit it to the policy decisions reached in legislative, executive, or judicial fora. The *res publica* is much larger than the sphere of government. It includes all those communities and institutions that form the rich fabric of civil society. It also includes all those public forms of discourse, conversation, and argument that constitute a culture.

Therefore, this Article will argue that we need to frame the question of the relation of religion to public life in a way that goes beyond discussion of the direct impact of religious convictions on policy choices. Religious faiths and traditions have perhaps their most important influence on government, law, and policy-formation in an indirect way. The impact of religion on politics understood as the sphere of governmental activity is mediated through its influence on the multiple communities and institutions of civil society and on the public self-understanding of a society called culture. Parts I and II of this Article will consider these public influences of religion. Part III will then address the more specific question of how religious beliefs ought to be related to public policy in light of the discussion of the first two parts.

## I. CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE MEANING OF "PUBLIC"

One prominent version of the argument for insulating the political process from the influence of religious convictions harks back to the dismaying historical record of the Catholic and Protestant communities during the sixteenth and seventeenth century wars of religion. This history is seen as a precedent for what is likely to happen today if religious communities decide to press their beliefs as guides for governmental decision making or public policy. Sometimes this historical appeal is augmented by references to "moral majorities" insisting on prayer in public schools, the teaching of "creation science" in these schools, and the imposition of religious convictions about abortion on those who do not share these convictions. Occasionally, such arguments are reinforced by references to the contemporary Islamic world and to nations where attempts have been made to base both constitutional and penal law on the *Shari'ah*. These historical and contemporary examples lead to considerable fear of what are seen as the likely results of public, political activity by religious

communities.

At the root of these fears of a public role for religion is what John Rawls calls "the fact of pluralism."<sup>1</sup> The regimes of modern democratic societies evolved historically as a way of responding to the diversity of conceptions of the meaning and purpose of life. This diversity is most evident in religious disagreement. But there is also a deep pluralism in philosophical conceptions of how to live a good life. Rawls says that this religious and philosophical pluralism

is not a mere historical condition that will soon pass away; it is, I believe, a permanent feature of the public culture of modern democracies. Under the political and social conditions secured by the basic rights and liberties historically associated with these regimes, the diversity of views will persist and may increase.<sup>2</sup>

Under these conditions, the "common sense political sociology of democratic societies" tells us that agreement on a single conception of the good life among all citizens is unattainable. Such agreement could be maintained "only by the oppressive use of state power."<sup>3</sup>

Rawls accurately points to the deep disputes that exist about the meaning of the good life in our society. But for him there is no way to resolve these disputes. Therefore he argues that the fact of pluralism demands that in politics we must deal with disagreements about the comprehensive good of human life by what he calls "the method of avoidance."<sup>4</sup> This method demands that in political life "we try, so far as we can, neither to assert nor to deny any religious, philosophical or moral views, or their associated philosophical accounts of truth and the status of values."<sup>5</sup> Avoidance of such basic questions is necessary in politics, Rawls thinks, if we are to have any chance of achieving consensus. "We simply apply the principle of toleration to philosophy itself" when debating the basic political and economic institutions that will structure social life.<sup>6</sup> Each man or woman must be free to hold his or her view of what the fully good life really is. But these comprehensive views of the good life must remain the private convictions of individuals. "In applying the principles of toleration to philosophy itself it is left to citizens individually to resolve for

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1. John Rawls, *The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus*, 7 OXFORD J. LEGAL STUD. 1, 4 (1987).

2. *Id.*

3. *Id.*; see also *id.* at 4 n.7 (giving a sketch of the presuppositions of this "common sense sociology").

4. *Id.* at 12.

5. *Id.* at 12-13.

6. *Id.* at 13.

themselves the questions of religion, philosophy and morals in accordance with the views they freely affirm.”<sup>7</sup> Or as Richard Rorty puts it, religious and philosophical convictions should be exempt from coercion in a liberal society under one condition: that such convictions “be reserved for private life.”<sup>8</sup> Argument about the common good is also to be avoided in debates about more specific public policies. Liberal democracy aims at “disengaging discussions of such questions from discussions of social policy.”<sup>9</sup> This privatization of “thick” visions of the good is not only a sociologically given fact; it is a moral constraint on political activity.

This analysis assumes that the presence of religious or comprehensive philosophical views of the good in public life inevitably leads to conflict. It further presupposes that the public sphere is identical with the domain governed by the coercive power of the state. From these presuppositions taken together, it follows that religious influence in public is identified with the coercive enforcement of the religious or philosophical convictions of whatever group is strong enough to gain control of government. Since this is clearly an unacceptable outcome, the alternative proposed is the privatization of religion.

I fully agree that the coercive imposition of religious beliefs is morally unacceptable, as do the vast majority of religious believers in the West today. The privatization of religion is not, however, the only alternative to such a coercive outcome if religion appears in public. Another approach to the question is founded on a more capacious understanding of what public life is, or at least could be. Drawing on my own Roman Catholic tradition, I want to outline such an approach. Reflection on the role played by a broader vision of the meaning of public life outside the United States may reinforce its plausibility.

For liberal thinkers like Rawls, the discussion of the role of religion in public life is framed by certain presuppositions about the institutions that structure social interaction. Their emphasis is on the state and the market as the principal domains in which social existence unfolds. At the same time, different forms of liberalism embody diverse attitudes of suspicion toward the institutions of government and the market. Libertarian liberals regard the state as the principal threat to human freedom and dignity. Consequently their aim is to keep governmental intervention minimal. Those with

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7. *Id.* at 15.

8. Richard Rorty, *The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy*, in *THE VIRGINIA STATUTE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: ITS EVOLUTION AND CONSEQUENCES IN AMERICAN HISTORY* 257, 263 (Merrill D. Peterson & Robert Vaughan eds., 1988).

9. *Id.*

a more social democratic orientation fear that the market is the principal threat and seek to limit its impact on individuals through governmental regulation and the institutions of the modern welfare state. In both of these ways of thinking, the paradigm that shapes analysis envisions individual persons confronting the "megastructures"<sup>10</sup> of either government or the market economy. The relation of private and public spheres is pictured as the relation of isolated individuals to large, anonymous, and impersonal institutional structures. Public activities are those conducted within the spheres of government and/or the market. The public sphere thus becomes the area of human life ruled either by the power of government or by the constraints of the marketplace. The defense of freedom, therefore, is viewed as the effort to secure a zone of action that is protected from governmental power or market determinism. This zone is private. To use Rawls' terms, it is the domain in which individuals can live "in accordance with the views they freely affirm."

A number of recent analyses of the contemporary social problematic have raised worrisome questions about the adequacy of this bipolar disjunction of human activity into public and private spheres. For example, Alan Wolfe's important book, *Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation*, has argued that the increasingly dense and interdependent spheres of politics and the marketplace threaten to overwhelm whatever remnants of private freedom still exist in advanced modern societies.<sup>11</sup> The sphere of freedom is "increasingly squeezed from two directions" — from the one side by the bureaucracy of the administrative state and from the other by powerful determinisms of markets linked together in an increasingly global network.<sup>12</sup> Wolfe argues that if the freedom promised by modernity is to survive under the conditions that prevail in advanced societies in the late twentieth century, we need a counterweight to this pressure from the state and the market. Solitary, private individuals cannot provide this counterweight. "We need civil society — families, communities, friendship networks, solidaristic workplace

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10. PETER L. BERGER & RICHARD J. NEUHAUS, *TO EMPOWER PEOPLE: THE ROLE OF MEDIATING STRUCTURES IN PUBLIC POLICY* 2 (1977) (using the term megastructures to refer primarily to the large bureaucracies of government).

11. ALAN WOLFE, *WHOSE KEEPER? SOCIAL SCIENCE AND MORAL OBLIGATION* 20 (1989).

12. *Id.*

ties, voluntarism, spontaneous groups and movements — not to reject, but to complete the project of modernity.”<sup>13</sup> He further maintains that the bonds of solidarity associated with closer and more intimate relations in the realm regarded as private by liberal theory “requires that we extend the ‘inward’ moral rules of civil society ‘outward’ to the realm of nonintimate and distant social relations.”<sup>14</sup> Wolfe does not mean to suggest that the moral framework that guides political or economic life can be based directly on the values of family life, the bonds of close friendships, or the solidarity of groups that share common religious or philosophical convictions. But he does argue that the bonds of community need to be given much greater *public* space than the sharp split of the political from the private advocated by Rawls and Rorty. The strong communal links found in the diverse groups of civil society must have greater public presence. Otherwise individuals will experience further diminishment of their freedom and power in the face of the growing complexity of distant governmental and economic megastructures. The image of human life as divided between a public sector of governments and markets and a private sector of individual autonomous freedom is unrealistic. Freedom will not flourish or perhaps even survive unless it enjoys greater presence and support in public. We need a more complex and differentiated picture of the world in which we really live.

This is not the place to rehearse the sociological arguments on which Wolfe bases his conclusions. For the purposes of this Article, I will presume that Wolfe’s analysis has revealed a significant problem in the prevailing conception of the relation of the public and private realms, and ask readers to assess my argument about the role of religion in political life in light of this presupposition.

To be even clearer about presuppositions, it will be obvious why Wolfe’s analysis is congenial to one who, like myself, has been shaped by the tradition of Roman Catholic social thought. Especially since the birth of modernity, the Roman Catholic tradition has been suspicious both of social theories extolling the primacy of the state and of theories granting primacy to the market. At the same time, this tradition has rejected individualistic understandings of freedom. In fact, its rejection of an individualistic understanding of the self is the source of its suspicion of both liberal contract theories of politics and laissez-faire models of economic life. Its view of the public-private relationship is not bipolar, with the megastructures of the state or the market defining the public sphere and the autonomous freedom of the individual defining the private sphere. Rather it proposes

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13. *Id.*

14. *Id.*

a model of social life that is richer and institutionally more pluralistic than that of standard liberal theory.

Modern Catholic teaching, to be sure, is strongly concerned about the fate of individuals. For example, Pope John XXIII stated that "[t]he cardinal point of this teaching [of the Catholic church] is that individual men are necessarily the foundation, cause, and end of all social institutions."<sup>15</sup> But the Pope immediately added: "We are referring to human beings, insofar as they are social by nature."<sup>16</sup> Human dignity and worth is never achieved in solitude, nor is the protection of this dignity simply a matter of insulating individuals from the costs (and denying them the opportunities) that attend interaction with others. Rather, the task of protecting human dignity and freedom is a task of protecting the quality of the relationships among persons in such a way that freedom and dignity can be realized. In this sense, there is no strictly private sphere. Because humans are relational beings whose identity, worth, and dignity is attained in interaction with others, human flourishing is always public or social. Thus Catholic social thought emphasizes the multiple forms of human relationship and community in which persons are formed and nurtured. Social space is not occupied only by the large institutions of government and market on the one hand and individuals on the other. This is evident in the tradition's stress on the importance of securing the well-being of "intermediary" institutions such as families and voluntary associations, and it is a key to understanding how we can envision a form of political life that is communal without being statist. It also suggests a way of envisioning the public role of religion that avoids the charge that whenever religion becomes public, religious coercion will be the result.

The distinction between the public sphere and the domain of governmental power was central to the discussion of the relation of the Catholic church to democracy that took place in the middle decades of this century and that bore fruit at the Second Vatican Council. In the 1950s, Jacques Maritain and John Courtney Murray argued for the compatibility of a public role for religion with the institutions of democracy by reaffirming the distinction between society and the state. Society is composed of a rich and overlapping set of human communities such as families, neighborhoods, churches, labor unions,

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15. Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, in *THE GOSPEL OF PEACE AND JUSTICE: CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING SINCE POPE JOHN 143*, 190 ¶ 219 (Joseph Gremillion ed., 1976).

16. *Id.*

corporations, professional associations, credit unions, cooperatives, universities, and a host of other associations. These communities are not private but public. Especially when they are small or of intermediate size, they enable persons to come together in ways that can be vividly experienced. The bonds of communal solidarity formed in them enable persons to act together, empowering them to shape some of the contours of public life and its larger social institutions such as the state and the economy. In a democratic society, government does not rule but rather serves the social "body" animated by the activity of these intermediate communities. Pope Pius XI formulated the matter in what came to be known as the principle of subsidiarity: government "ought of its very nature to furnish help [*subsidium*] to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them."<sup>17</sup> Or in Maritain's words, "[t]he State is inferior to the body politic as a whole, and is at the service of the body politic as a whole."<sup>18</sup> The body politic or civil society is the primary locus in which human solidarity is realized.

In the writings of Maritain and Murray, the society-state distinction is at the root of their affirmation both of religious freedom and of constitutional democracy. It is the basis for their firm opposition to all forms of totalitarianism, state absolutism, or religious coercion. The writ of government does not reach as far as the full scope of the public life of society. The defense of the free exercise of religion and the defense of the existence and freedom of the communities that make up civil society are directly linked to each other. Thus the right to religious freedom and the rights to public association and public expression are inseparable. As Murray concluded,

[T]he personal or corporate free exercise of religion, as a human and civil right, is evidently cognate with other more general human and civil rights — with the freedom of corporate bodies and institutions within society, based on the principle of subsidiary function; with the general freedom of association for peaceful purposes, based on the social nature of man; with the general freedom of speech and of the press, based on the nature of political society.<sup>19</sup>

This argument reveals one way that a Catholic understanding of the institutions of democracy and the human rights that undergird them presents a challenge to those forms of liberalism concerned exclusively or primarily with the defense of the freedom of individuals to act as they please in a zone of privacy. The presupposition about the basis of democracy is not the sovereign autonomy of the individual. Participation in public life and the exercise of freedom in society

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17. Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* ¶ 79 (National Catholic Welfare Conference, Washington, D.C., 1942).

18. JACQUES MARITAIN, *MAN AND THE STATE* 13 (1951).

19. JOHN C. MURRAY, *THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM* 26-27 (1965).



depend on the strength of the communal institutions that give persons a measure of real power to shape their environment, including their political environment. As John Coleman has argued, this kind of commitment to democracy rests on “a presumptive rule about where real vitality exists in society” — in the diverse and overlapping communities that make up civil society.<sup>20</sup> The public and the social, therefore, are not to be identified with the sphere of government. Social practices and institutions can be truly public even though not under governmental control. Thus churches, just like all the other associations that make up civil society, must be both free from domination by the state and free to act and express themselves in public.

The importance of civil society as a public sphere that is not dominated by the state was powerfully illustrated by the way the recent collapse of communism was so rapidly brought about in Central and Eastern Europe. The power of the dissident workers and intellectuals of the “velvet revolutions” of 1989 grew out of their success in creating the solidarity of a genuine civil society, not out of direct seizure of state power or out of the barrel of a gun. What were initially extragovernmental bonds of community at Gdansk’s shipyards and Prague’s Magic Lantern Theater empowered men and women to effect a stunning transformation of supposedly untransformable totalitarian regimes. In the words of Bronislaw Geremek, Speaker of the Parliament in Poland, the emergence of civil society out from under the dominant apparatus of the state became possible when

Dissidents engaged in their own peculiar type of mental resistance, which typically began with a refusal to participate in falsehood, grew into a desire to bear loud witness to one’s own views and conscience, and then finally drove one to political action . . . . The idea of civil society — even one that avoids overtly political activities in favor of education, the exchange of information and opinion, or the protection of the basic interests of particular groups — has enormous antitotalitarian potential.<sup>21</sup>

The public role of religion in the revolutions of 1989 varied from one country to another, and the churches were surely not the sole agents of this transformation.<sup>22</sup> But there is no question that the commitment of the churches was crucial in sustaining the many overlapping communities that make up civil society — communities

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20. JOHN A. COLEMAN, *AN AMERICAN STRATEGIC THEOLOGY* 226 (1982).

21. Bronislaw Geremek, *Civil Society and the Present Age*, in *THE IDEA OF CIVIL SOCIETY* 11, 11-12 (1992).

22. NEILS NEILSEN, *REVOLUTIONS IN EASTERN EUROPE: THE RELIGIOUS ROOTS* (1991).

that refused to submit to state domination. Adam Michnik, a Jewish intellectual and Solidarity activist, described the Catholic church's role in Poland this way several years before the revolution occurred:

The problem faced by Polish society is that civil society doesn't exist. Society is not recognized as capable of organizing itself to defend its particular interests and points of view . . . . [T]he present totalitarian system insists that every person is State property. The Church's view is that every person is a child of God, to whom God has granted natural liberty . . . . It follows from this that in Poland and other communist countries religion is the natural antidote to the totalitarian claims of the State authorities.<sup>23</sup>

In East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, as well as in Poland, the recovery of freedom, the revival of civil society, and the public presence of the churches (Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant) were closely connected phenomena.

These recent events in Central and Eastern Europe may seem irrelevant to an effort to clarify the proper public role for religion in the United States. There is an analogy, however, between the destruction of civil society under Communist rule in the Eastern bloc and the weakening of civil society in the West that Alan Wolfe fears is occurring. To be sure, if the alternatives to present patterns of American society are communist totalitarianism, the authoritarian oligopolies that have been dominant in much of Latin American history, or the one-party states common in Africa, there can be no doubt of the superiority of the democratic institutions of the North Atlantic. But the choice we face in the politics of the United States today is not one between democracy and authoritarianism. Rather it is at least a plausible hypothesis that here the more immediate threat to a civil society capable of nurturing freedom is not an authoritarian state, but the dominance of the market and the market's instrumental rationality over increasingly large domains of social and cultural life.

If this hypothesis is correct, the liberal instinct to treat all activities that are not directly governmental as private is not only sociologically inaccurate but politically dangerous. Among the many "nongovernmental organizations" that have a crucial role to play in sustaining the vision of public life that is crucial to democracy are the churches. This is so for two reasons.

First, the assertion of the right to religious freedom was a key factor in the movement that brought about modern constitutional democracy. This right was not only "cognate" with the full range of the human rights of a democratic society, as John Courtney Murray maintained in the passage cited above. It was one of the principal causal forces, socially embodied in religious communities, that led to

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23. Erica Blair, *Towards a Civil Society: Hopes for Polish Democracy*, TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT, Feb. 19, 1988, at 199 (interview with Adam Michnik).

the rise of modern democracy. For this reason, the freedom of the many diverse communities of solidarity in civil society and the freedom of the churches rise or fall together. An effort to privatize religion, whether in practice or in theory, therefore, is "cognate" with an effort to privatize every human activity that is not properly part of the exercise of state power. A successful move in this direction will leave the individual human being alone and defenseless in the face of the encroaching power of the market. It will also leave the individual unable to form those bonds of solidarity that are essential if government is to be made to function in a way that keeps the market in its place. An active, public role for religion, therefore, would seem to be one of the preconditions of a vibrant democratic life.

Second, the churches possess unique resources that can contribute to the strengthening of other communities of solidarity in civil society. Ideas about love of neighbor — about commitment to the well being of other persons — are present in all religious traditions. The meaning of this love and commitment, of course, is interpreted in different ways in different religious traditions. But all these traditions possess resources that can serve as an antidote to the idea that a democratic society can be successfully constructed on self-interest or, as Rawls would have it, mutual disinterest. More than this is needed if any public realm is to thrive or even survive in the face of market pressures and the logic of instrumental market-rationality.

Further, sociologist Robert Wuthnow's empirical survey-research has shown that people's spiritual concerns translate into active efforts to respond to the needs of their neighbors only when these concerns are lived out in the context of a publicly visible and active religious community. Wuthnow's data suggest that understanding religion or spirituality as a purely private affair between an individual and his or her god, without the mediation of a religious community with a public presence in society, has little effect on believers' responses to their neighbors:

I interpret these results to mean that religious inclinations make very little difference unless one becomes involved in some kind of organized religious community. Once you are involved in such a community, then a higher level of piety may be associated with putting yourself out to help the needy. But if you are not involved in some kind of religious organization, then a higher level of piety seems unlikely to generate charitable efforts toward the poor or disadvantaged.<sup>24</sup>

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24. ROBERT WUTHNOW, *ACTS OF COMPASSION: CARING FOR OTHERS AND HELPING OURSELVES* 156 (1991).

The increasing privatization of religion as not only separated from the sphere of government but as a purely personal affair independent of any organized religious community thus seems to threaten to undermine any positive effects religion can have in society. Wuthnow concludes that “[i]f religious values have been an inducement for people to care for their neighbors historically, then the spread of individualism within modern religion is likely to have a dampening effect on charitable behavior.”<sup>25</sup>

Wuthnow’s conclusion on the link between religious convictions and charitable behavior is echoed in the preliminary findings of a study of political activism in the United States being conducted by my colleague Kay Schlozman in cooperation with Sidney Verba, Henry Brady, and Norman Nie. One of the conclusions of this study is that participation in church activities appears to sow seeds of political activism. “Churches are ‘incubators’ for tomorrow’s political activists.”<sup>26</sup> Engagement in church-related activity teaches organizational skills that are readily transferable to politics. In addition, the study has found that “contrary to political scientists’ assumptions, personal gain played a minimal role in causing people to become active. The responses [of those surveyed in the study] indicate that psychological rewards, such as commitment to community and ‘doing one’s civic duty,’ are primary motivators.”<sup>27</sup> This suggests that an active presence of religious communities in the public life of the country can strengthen rather than threaten democracy. If one fears that public life is becoming increasingly fragile, the prescription would appear to be more church involvement in public life, not less.

## II. CULTURE, PUBLIC DISCOURSE, AND THE COMMON GOOD

Such a proposal for strengthening the bonds of communal solidarity in society, of course, can be expected to be greeted with suspicion by those who fear that it will lead to coerced cohesion. This is particularly so when the proposal includes the suggestion that religious communities should play a more public role in shaping the bonds that link persons together in public. There is apprehension that this will lead churches to act simply as special interest groups, seeking power to press their own agendas through the political process. Thus the position being advocated here must respond to the legitimate question of whether any strong vision of solidarity can be pursued beyond the boundaries of small and intermediate sized communities

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25. *Id.*

26. See the report on these preliminary findings in John Omblett, *Activists Get Their Training at Church*, B.C. BIWEEKLY, Mar. 26, 1992, at 5.

27. *Id.*

without sacrificing intellectual freedom and social pluralism. Thinkers like Rawls are very skeptical that this is possible. Because he thinks the effort to achieve some consensus about the common good of the larger society is necessarily futile, he concludes that we will have to get along with a politics that is neutral on competing conceptions of the good life. Thus all talk about the "comprehensive" human good should be restricted to the private sphere.

The experience of history shows that these fears are not products of fantasy. Societies characterized by strong bonds of solidarity have sometimes been oppressive of freedom. Religious groups have sometimes used state power to stifle pluralism. And it will surely be difficult to find an alternative to the commitment to neutrality about the meaning of the human good in a nation and a world where awareness of diversity is growing.

Nevertheless, if the argument of the previous part of this Article is correct, paying exclusive attention to the dangers of closed communities and the difficulty of establishing dialogue among the subgroups in a pluralistic society also poses a serious threat to the quality of social life. We would do better, as Robin Lovin has suggested, to try to develop an understanding of the relationship of religion and politics "in terms that fit the discourse to which we aspire, rather than the distortions that we fear."<sup>28</sup>

Lovin points out that theories which support efforts to insulate the political domain from any religious influence are "curiously abstract" and do not describe well the role religious beliefs actually play in the lives of many people.<sup>29</sup> In fact, people's conceptions of how life ought to be lived — including religious conceptions — are routinely introduced into public discourse. Even those who profess to support public neutrality on the meaning of the good life find it difficult to live up to their ideal in practice. The interconnection of our lives and the common institutions we share make the demand that we be silent on the deeper issues of how we should live together itself seem like a form of repression. Is it really possible to maintain that fundamental convictions about the meaning of the good life can be regarded as private preferences rather than matters of high public importance in a society like ours? At a historical moment when persons are increasingly interdependent on each other and in which their fates are so obviously worked out in a natural environment they

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28. Robin W. Lovin, *Perry, Naturalism, and Religion in Public*, 63 TUL. L. REV. 1517, 1539 (1989).

29. *Id.* at 1518-19.

share in common, a negative answer to this question seems almost obvious.

We also need to question whether the method proposed for securing justice in public life by those who argue for political neutrality on the full human good can actually succeed. According to Rawls and others who follow his lead, we can publicly debate about the means that will satisfy the maximum number of private preferences about the good. But they maintain that the terms of this debate must be set by "public reason." This is defined as "the shared methods of, and the public knowledge available to, common sense, and the procedures and conclusions of science when these are not controversial."<sup>30</sup> Rawls adopts this criterion for public morality because he thinks that no other standards of judgment are available in the face of contemporary philosophical and religious pluralism. Rorty goes further. For Rorty, the exclusion of religious and philosophical understandings of the good life from the public domain is desirable in itself, not just a necessary consequence of the fact of pluralism. It "helps along the disenchantment of the world. It helps make the world's inhabitants more pragmatic, more tolerant, more liberal, more receptive to the appeal of instrumental rationality."<sup>31</sup>

Common sense, uncontroversial science, and instrumental rationality are very shaky foundations for the civic unity of the nation. In fact, there is considerable evidence that the lack of more substantive discourse about the common good is a source of the alienation of many citizens from participation in political activity today. In an insightful book titled *Why Americans Hate Politics*, E. J. Dionne argues that this alienation can be attributed to the fact that current political discourse fails to address the real needs of communities. This failure is itself partly the result of the fact that interest-group politics is frequently incapable of even naming the social bonds that increasingly destine us to sharing either a common good or a "common bad."<sup>32</sup> Politics is perceived as a contest among interest groups with little or no concern for the wider society and its problems. Thus the "common sense" that shapes American public life today becomes increasingly governed by a cynical "I'll get mine" attitude. Neutrality about the good on the level of theory in this way becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy on the level of practice. A principled commitment to avoiding sustained discourse about the human good produces a downward spiral in which shared meaning, understanding, and community become even harder to achieve. It can lead to a politics that is little more than a quasi-market in preferences and power.

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30. Rawls, *supra* note 1, at 8.

31. Rorty, *supra* note 8, at 271.

32. E. J. DIONNE, JR., *WHY AMERICANS HATE POLITICS* (1991).

Are there alternatives to political neutrality about the meaning of the good life that could generate greater social solidarity without stifling freedom and suppressing pluralism? A closer look at the historical record shows that memories of the role religion has played in generating political conflict and even violence, though accurate, are not the whole story. Other memories suggest ways of responding to Lovin's call to develop our thinking in ways that fit the discourse to which we aspire rather than the distortions we fear.

For example, the Catholic tradition provides some noteworthy evidence that discourse across the boundaries of diverse communities is both possible and potentially fruitful when it is pursued seriously. This tradition, in its better moments, has experienced considerable success in efforts to bridge the divisions that have separated it from other communities with other understandings of the good life. In the first and second centuries, the early Christian community moved from being a small Palestinian sect to active encounter with the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. In the fourth century, Augustine brought biblical faith into dialogue with Stoic and Neoplatonic thought. His efforts profoundly transformed both Christian and Graeco-Roman thought and practice. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas once again transformed Western Christianity by appropriating ideas from Aristotle that he had learned from Arab Muslims and from Jews. In the process he also transformed Aristotelian ways of thinking in fundamental ways. Not the least important of these transformations was his insistence that the political life of a people is not the highest realization of the good of which they are capable — an insight that lies at the root of constitutional theories of limited government.<sup>33</sup> And though the Church resisted the liberal discovery of modern freedoms through much of the modern period, liberalism has been transforming Catholicism once again through the last half of our own century. The memory of these events in social and intellectual history as well as the experience of the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council leads me to hope that communities holding different visions of the good life can get somewhere if they are willing to risk conversation and argument about these visions. Injecting such hope back into the public life of the United States would be a signal achievement. Today, it appears to be not only desirable but necessary.

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33. For documentation and analysis of the medieval roots of constitutionalism and theories of limited government, see BRIAN TIERNEY, *THE CRISIS OF CHURCH & STATE 1050-1300* (1964).

The spirit that is required for such discourse about the public good might be called intellectual solidarity — a willingness to take other persons seriously enough to engage them in conversation and debate about what they think makes life worth living, including what they think will make for the good of the polis. Such a spirit is partially the same but entirely different from an appeal to tolerance as the appropriate response to pluralism. Tolerance is a strategy of noninterference with the beliefs and life-styles of those who are different. It leads to what Rawls calls the “method of avoidance” as the appropriate way to deal with persons or traditions that are “other.” The spirit of intellectual solidarity is similar to tolerance in that it recognizes and respects these differences. It does not seek to eliminate pluralism through coercion. But it differs radically from pure tolerance by seeking not avoidance but positive engagement with the other through both listening and speaking. It is rooted in a hope that understanding might replace incomprehension and that perhaps even agreement could result. And since it seeks an exchange that is a *mutual* listening and speaking, it can only develop in an atmosphere of genuine freedom. Also, because this exchange is mutual, the freedom in which it takes place is not the private freedom of an atomistic self. Where such conversation about the good life begins and develops, a *community* of freedom begins to exist. And this is itself a major part of the common good. Indeed it is this freedom in reciprocal dialogue that is one of the characteristics that distinguishes a community of solidarity from one marked by domination and repression.

What might such public discourse look like? First, it will concern visions of those human goods that are neither strictly political nor strictly economic. Broadly speaking, this is conversation and argument about the shape of the culture the participants either share because of their common traditions or could share in the future through the understanding of each other they seek to achieve. The forum for such discussion is not, in the first instance, the legislative chamber or the court of law. It is the university and all the other venues where thoughtful men and women undertake the tasks of retrieving, criticizing, and reconstructing understandings of the human good from the historical past and transmitting them to the future through education. It occurs as well wherever people bring their received historical traditions on the meaning of the good life into intelligent and critical encounter with understandings of this good held by other peoples with other traditions. It occurs, in short, wherever education about and serious inquiry into the meaning of the good life takes place.<sup>34</sup>

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34. The similarity of this cultural endeavor with what Michael Perry calls “ecumenical politics” is evident. See MICHAEL J. PERRY, *LOVE AND POWER: THE ROLE OF*



This education and inquiry is at the heart of intellectual solidarity and the public life of society, and its presence (or absence) will have crucial political implications. As John Courtney Murray once noted, "[t]he great 'affair' of the commonwealth is, of course, education."<sup>35</sup> He was referring to education in the broadest sense: the organization of schools and their curricula, but even more to the level of critical cultural self-understanding among both the populace at large and among its elites. In both theory and practice today, this entire cultural and educational project of understanding, criticizing, and reconstructing visions of what it is to be authentically human (Rawls' "comprehensive understandings of the good") is often treated as a private affair. Murray's insistence that this project is not only *an* affair but *the* great affair of the commonwealth challenges this presupposition frontally. To the extent that moral and political theories seek to exclude the task of education and inquiry from the public forum by privatizing all full visions of the human good, they undermine the very foundations of public life.

David Tracy fears that this process of undermining is already far advanced. He has argued that the privatization of these cultural concerns threatens so to instrumentalize and technicize public life as to destroy it altogether.<sup>36</sup> In much contemporary liberal thought, both theoretical and popular, tolerance of diversity has become the premier cultural lesson to be learned. But if a community that prizes both solidarity and freedom is to be realized, engagement with the other, and not just tolerance, is required. In such engagement, a person's own deeper convictions are set forward as potential contributions to public understanding and simultaneously placed at risk of revision.

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RELIGION AND MORALITY IN AMERICAN POLITICS (1991). I am not fully clear, however, about the degree to which Perry sees this dialogue about the good life (what he calls "the question of the truly, fully human") as occurring principally in the sphere of politics conceived as the domain of government and law, or whether he has a broader understanding of politics in mind, i.e., the political as all that occurs in the public life of society. If the latter, his understanding of ecumenical politics is very similar to what I am here calling cultural conversation and argument. There is also a similarity between what I am proposing and Alasdair MacIntyre's understanding of a "tradition of enquiry," though MacIntyre is virtually silent about how this understanding is related to the domain of government, law, and the political sphere narrowly conceived. See ALASDAIR C. MACINTYRE, *WHOSE JUSTICE? WHICH RATIONALITY?* 349-403 (1988).

35. JOHN C. MURRAY, *WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS: CATHOLIC REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN PROPOSITION* 9 (1960).

36. See David Tracy, *Catholic Classics in American Liberal Culture*, in *CATHOLICISM AND LIBERALISM: CONTRIBUTIONS TO AMERICAN PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY* 196-213 (R. Bruce Douglass & David Hollenbach eds., 1994).

Seen in this light, it is no accident that the arts, the theater, and philosophy played a central role in breaking the grip of totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia.<sup>37</sup> Though the task of sustaining and strengthening public life in the United States today is without doubt very different than in Central Europe, the importance of genuinely public conversation and argument about what forms of human living are truly good is equally important here. As will be discussed below, such discussion occurs partly in our discourse about the institutions of political and economic life and also in discussion of more particular policies in both spheres. The quality of these political and economic debates, however, will be dependent on the depth of the larger cultural exchange. The achievement of solidarity in the political and economic domains is dependent on the strengthening of free discourse in the cultural sphere — intellectual solidarity in a cultural community of freedom.

Second, the possibility and necessity of such a truly free cultural exchange has direct implications for the role of religion in public life. We must begin to entertain the possibility of conversation about the visions of the human good held by diverse religious communities and of intellectual engagement with them. Such a suggestion will be beyond the pale if one views all religious convictions as a rigid set of beliefs held on nonrational grounds. In this view, religion is very likely to be a source of division, conflict, and even violence when it appears in public. It is inherently uncivil.

The Catholic tradition and many Protestant traditions as well, however, reject the notion that religious faith must be irrational and, therefore, uncivil. Faith and understanding go hand in hand in both the Catholic and Calvinist views of the matter. They are not adversarial but reciprocally illuminating. As Tracy puts it, Catholic social thought seeks to correlate arguments drawn from the distinctive religious symbols of Christianity with arguments based on shared public experience.<sup>38</sup> This effort at correlation moves back and forth on a two-way street. It rests on a conviction that the classical symbols and doctrines of Christianity can uncover meaning in personal and social existence that common sense and uncontroversial science fail to see. So it invites those outside the church to place their self-understanding at risk by what Tracy calls conversation with such “classics.” At the same time, the believer’s self-understanding is also placed at risk

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37. See VÁCLAV HAVEL, *DISTURBING THE PEACE: A CONVERSATION WITH KAREL HVIZDALA* (Paul Wilson trans., 1990). Rorty has taken a dim view of the role of philosophy in the Czechoslovakian revolution, or at least of the idea that Havel and other Charter '77 leaders could take “metaphysical” claims for the basis of public morality at face value. See Rorty’s review of several books by Jan Patočka, the philosopher who was the symbolic leader of Charter '77, Richard Rorty, *The Seer of Prague*, *NEW REPUBLIC*, July 1, 1991, at 35-40.

38. See Tracy, *supra* note 36.

because it can be challenged to development or even fundamental change by dialogue with the other — whether this be a secular agnostic, a Christian from another tradition, or a Jew, Muslim, or Buddhist.

Intellectual solidarity has religious implications. It means that in a community of freedom, religion should be represented in the discourse about the goods of public life. It equally means that religious believers must enter this discourse prepared to listen as well as to speak, to learn from what they hear, and, if necessary, to change as a result of what they have learned. The experience of the Catholic Church over the last half century has been a vivid example of such listening, learning, and changing through its encounter with liberalism. This process must and will continue as Catholics develop their self-understanding into the future. Is it too much to expect that the experience of transformation through engagement rather than tolerance could strengthen America's public philosophy in an analogous way?<sup>39</sup>

Serious dialogue is risky business. At least some religious believers have been willing to take this risk. The future of public life in our society could be considerably enhanced by the willingness of a considerably larger number of people to take this risk of cultural dialogue, whether they begin as fundamentalists convinced of their certitudes or agnostics convinced of their doubts. Our society needs more imagination about how to deal creatively with the problems it faces than instrumental rationality can provide. In Martha Nussbaum's words, a vision of the full human good arises from

[M]yths and stories from many times and places, stories explaining to both friends and strangers what it is to be human rather than something else. The account is the outcome of a process of self-interpretation and self-clarification that makes use of the story-telling imagination far more than the scientific intellect.<sup>40</sup>

Religious traditions and communities are among the principal bearers of these imaginative sources for our understanding of the human good. They can evoke not only private self-understanding but public vision as well. Both believers and unbelievers alike have reason to risk considering what contribution religious traditions might make to our understanding of the public good. For a society to try to

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39. See PERRY, *supra* note 34; see also Lovin, *supra* note 28, at 1517-39. Both Perry's earlier work and Lovin's theological reflection on it are discussed in my *Religion and Political Life*, 52 THEOLOGICAL STUD. 87 (1991).

40. Martha Nussbaum, *Aristotelian Social Democracy*, in LIBERALISM AND THE GOOD 203, 217 (R. Bruce Douglass et al. eds., 1990).

exclude religious narratives and symbols from public life simply because they are identified with religion would be to impoverish itself intellectually and culturally. This would deprive society of one of its most important resources for a more publicly shared cultural self-understanding. Religious communities make perhaps their most important contribution to public life through this contribution to the formation of culture. If they seek to make this contribution through a dialogue of mutual listening and speaking with others, it will be fully congruent with the life of a free society.

### III. RELIGION AND PUBLIC POLICY, MORE NARROWLY CONSIDERED

These perspectives on the role of religion in sustaining civil society and forming culture provide a context for considering the more pointed question of the relation of religious belief to the political sphere more narrowly conceived. What role ought belief to play in the decisions of those who draft legislation, reach judicial decisions, administer the domestic and foreign affairs of the nation, or exercise the responsibilities of citizenship (minimally through the vote)? This is the question that has been central in the recent debate about the political role of religion among legal scholars and political philosophers, and it is an important and entirely legitimate one. But the perspectives outlined in this Article may shed some new light on how to go about addressing this issue.

The presupposition of those who would place stringent limits on appealing to religious belief in the formulation of law and public policy is that there is a sharp discontinuity between a community of religious believers and the larger body of public society. They see a similar discontinuity between religious reasons for particular policy choices and publicly accessible reasons for such choices. In Kent Greenawalt's analysis, religious belief is not accessible to public reason because it is deeply rooted in the personal experience of the believer. It is the experience of the believer that confirms religious truth for him or her. Thus other persons who do not share the same experiences have no way to assess the truth of the beliefs involved. Because there is "no interpersonal way in which the weight of personal experience is to be assessed," there is no interpersonal way to assess the truth of the religious beliefs grounded in such experience.<sup>41</sup> Though Greenawalt rejects the idea that religion is a purely private or idiosyncratic affair, the presence of subjective experience in religious belief means that, in the end, its truth cannot be publicly assessed. This Article has argued that these presuppositions ought to

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41. Kent Greenawalt, *Religious Convictions and Political Choice: Some Further Thoughts*, 39 DEPAUL L. REV. 1019, 1031 (1990).

be questioned. Though religious belief is doubtless confirmed and supported by personal experience, so is the insight into the beauty of a great work of literature, music, or sculpture. In the domain of the aesthetic, judgments of value are not publicly assessable by the criteria of common sense and uncontroversial science, but that does not make them purely subjective. We can and do make judgments about the relative merits of novels, poems, and paintings. The loss of the ability to make such judgments in a particular society is a sign of decadence and decline in its culture. Religious understandings of the human good play an important role in shaping the culture of civil society. To regard religious convictions as beyond the reach of any public assessment is to deny the possibility of the kind of dialogue within a pluralistic society advocated here. Similarly, religious communities are constituent parts of civil society, and efforts to confine their activities to a zone of privacy will weaken civil society in dangerous ways.

The framework for considering the place of religious belief in the formulation of public policy thus shifts from a discussion of the role of private communities and convictions in the shaping of political life to a discussion of the proper role of the many public communities of civil society and the diverse public traditions within a culture in reaching decisions about policy in a pluralistic society. Framed this way, the proper role of religious convictions in the advocacy of particular political choices is the same as the role of convictions that are not religious. Persons or groups should not face political disability or disenfranchisement simply because their political views are rooted in religious traditions and beliefs.

At the same time, it has been argued here that it would be a serious mistake for religious communities to operate in public simply as interest groups seeking to enforce their views through state power. How is it possible to affirm that religious communities can legitimately operate in the political sphere just like nonreligious communities do, and yet to reject the idea that they can rightly function like interest groups playing the game of majoritarian politics? The answer to this question depends on clarifying the *manner in which* believers or churches move from their faith convictions to their conclusions about policy.

The issue of how churches should make this move is itself partly a religious and theological one. Certain religious traditions hold that the *Bible*, other normative scriptures, or some form of church authority can provide direct guidance for decisions about public policy.

In this view, for at least some areas of public life, conclusions about public policy or law are directly entailed by religious convictions with no intermediary steps in the argument. For example, some conservative evangelical or fundamentalist Christians draw policy conclusions about the rights of homosexuals or about prayer in public schools directly from the *Bible*, while Mennonites conclude that a pacifist rejection of all war is an immediate consequence of the teachings of Jesus. Some more conservative Catholics regard the legal banning of abortion as similarly entailed by the moral teachings of the pope and the Catholic bishops. From what has been said above about the need for believers to enter into dialogue with others in society as they develop their vision of the larger meaning of the social good and its consequences for policy, it is evident that I do not accept this understanding of the relation between religious belief and policy conclusions as immediate and direct. Roman Catholic thought, like much of Protestant thought as well, maintains that religious belief must be complemented by the careful use of human reasoning, both philosophical and social scientific, in the effort to reach decisions about policy that are both religiously and humanly adequate. In Tracy's terms, when Christians advocate public policies, convictions rooted in the *Bible* and Christian tradition must be brought into mutually critical correlation with understandings based on human experience and reasoned reflection on this experience. Such a stance reflects a religious and theological perspective that views faith and reason as complementary to each other, not as opposed or fundamentally bifurcated from each other.

This theological stance is not shared by all Christians. For example, some Christians hold that human reason is so corrupted by the fall that it is an unreliable guide for both religion and morality, and that culture is so distorted by sin that it should be simply opposed, not regarded as a dialogue partner. Therefore it can be asked whether the dialogic framework for the relation of religious convictions and public policy is really compatible with full participation by all religious groups in the shaping of public life. David Smolin has raised such an objection to Michael Perry's argument that religious convictions are properly admitted to the debate about policy if these convictions are open to revision through dialogue with those who do not share them, but that convictions that are taken as fixed and irreformable should be excluded from this debate. Smolin concludes that "Perry has used his own vision of good religion as the standard for admission to political and legal debate."<sup>42</sup> Perry's standard excludes "theologically conservative theists, including various Protestant Christians (evangelicals, fundamentalists, and pentecostals) and

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42. David M. Smolin, *Regulating Religious and Cultural Conflict in a*

traditionalists (Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Lutherans). Those excluded, moreover, include the religious groups most active in trying to displace the cultural hegemony of America's highly secularized elites."<sup>43</sup>

In his contribution to this Symposium, Perry has acknowledged the force of Smolin's complaint. He now agrees that his former argument for the inclusion of some religious convictions in the public debate and for the exclusion of others rests on theological/epistemological views that are widely contested in American society. Perry's most recent position is that because these views are contested, they ought not to be excluded from the actual public debate where this contest takes place. He proposes that his disagreement with conservative Protestants and traditionalist Catholics ought to be part of the public debate, not excluded from it. He would conduct this argument in public on properly religious and theological grounds, not exclude it from the public sphere. In an ironic way, Perry now wants to admit *all* religious-moral convictions to the public square for the same reason that Rawls and others want to exclude them: because they are controverted. Perry thus proposes that engagement with religious and philosophical difference be carried to its full conclusion — public debate should include debate that is properly theological. Perry would argue with Smolin, and in this argument try to show that Smolin's views rest on bad theology and bad epistemology.

[I]t is one thing to say to a David Smolin, "Although your arguments, no less than mine, may serve as a (sole) basis for political choice, this is why I reject your arguments and think others should too." It is another thing to say, "I don't even have to try to meet your arguments on the merits, because, unlike mine, they may not serve as a basis for political choice."<sup>44</sup>

I am in fundamental agreement with the thrust of Perry's response to Smolin's critique. There should be no religious tests for entry into public debate in a democratic society. But it can be questioned whether the real differences between Perry and Smolin, which are religious and theological, are best dealt with in arguments about quite precise issues that are up for decision in the spheres of law and public policy. As Kent Greenawalt has observed, there is reason for

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*Postmodern America: A Response to Professor Perry*, 76 IOWA L. REV. 1067, 1076-77 (1991).

43. *Id.* at 1077-78.

44. Michael J. Perry, *Religious Morality and Political Choice: Further Thoughts—And Second Thoughts—On Love and Power*, 30 SAN DIEGO L. REV. 703, 717-18 (1993).

skepticism about “the promise of religious perspectives being transformed in what is primarily political debate.”<sup>45</sup> For example, I do not think it would be helpful for two judges, one a liberal Catholic and the other a conservative Protestant, to launch into epistemological and theological reasoning to explain why their responses to a piece of legislation regarding abortion are different. These theological and epistemological differences are better dealt with in the discussions that take place in the sphere I have called cultural, not that of the political sphere conceived narrowly as the judiciary or legislature. This cultural domain is fully public, and participation in it should be open to all comers. The work of the legislature and the courts, however, depends on the preexistence of some consensus in civil society and culture, and lawmakers must rely on this consensus if their activity is to be in any sense democratic. For the legislature or the courts to undertake the settlement of controverted religious or philosophical differences would border dangerously close to a form of political absolutism, even totalitarianism.

The arguments that Perry wants to have with Smolin about theology and religious epistemology should be vigorous and public. Similarly, serious contributions by the churches to public conversation and argument about our cultural understanding of the meaning of human life should be encouraged, not discouraged. It will be precisely through the development and refinement of such understanding in our culture that a stronger consensus about the goods to be pursued in politics will be generated. To the extent that this larger cultural dialogue is in some measure successful, the reasons offered by believers for their more specific decisions about policy will become more publicly accessible in society at large.

Although the domains of government and policy-formation are not generally the appropriate ones in which to argue controverted theological and philosophical issues, it is nevertheless neither possible nor desirable to construct an airtight barrier between politics and culture. In general, public policy should reflect the cultural consensus about the social good that is present among the people. But at times, urgent questions of law and politics raise new questions about the cultural consensus that already exists. This was clearly the case during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Discriminatory laws and policies were themselves the problem that had to be addressed, and religious leaders such as Martin Luther King did not hesitate to seek to overcome the racist history of American culture by advocating political and legal change directly. In the civil rights movement, argument about the larger cultural vision of the human good was stimulated by debate about specific policies. This seems to me a fully

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45. Greenawalt, *supra* note 41, at 1034.



legitimate example of religious engagement in the sphere of policy. Similar examples, in my view, are the United States Catholic bishops' recent pastoral letters on war and peace and on economic justice. These raised fundamental questions about the values of American society and culture in the context of addressing the more detailed questions of policy regarding nuclear strategy, unemployment, and poverty.

Thus religious contributions to policy debates need not always wait until a larger cultural consensus is achieved. Rather, public discourse between religious communities and the larger society will move back and forth between larger cultural questions of value and meaning on the one hand and more specific policy questions on the other. The more general understandings of the human good present in the culture and the more specific questions to be addressed in policy and law will mutually illuminate each other, both for religious communities and for the larger society as well. In this way, a genuine public conversation about the social good might be generated. An attempt to keep religious communities and convictions entirely separated from matters of policy will silence this conversation, especially at moments when it is most urgently needed.

Only when such conversation occurs does a free society or a community of freedom really exist. Religious arguments have a proper place in this conversation. And their presence should be governed by the conditions necessary for all genuine conversation and mutual inquiry: pursuit of the truth and respect for the other in an atmosphere of freedom. Such conditions, rather than neatly drawn lines or high walls of separation, should determine the proper role of religious belief in a pluralistic and democratic society.

