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Consensus, convergence, and COVID-19: The ethical role of religious reasons in leaders' response to COVID-19

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Abstract

Focusing on current efforts to persuade the public to comply with COVID-19 best practices, this essay examines what role appeals to religious reasons should (or should not) play in leaders' attempts to secure followers' acceptance of group policies in contexts of religious and moral pluralism. While appeals to followers' religious commitments can be helpful in promoting desirable public health outcomes, they also raise moral concerns when made in the contexts of secular institutions with religiously diverse participants. In these contexts, leaders who appeal to religious reasons as bases of justification for imposing COVID policies may seem to fail to show respect for the autonomy of those who lack the relevant religious commitments, and—especially when a leader herself rejects the religious commitments she makes reference to to persuade others—her appeals to religious reasons may seem to constitute ethically problematic exercises of manipulation. This essay draws on the resources of contemporary political philosophy to analyze and respond to these concerns and concludes that they are not sufficiently well-founded. To the contrary, it contends that there are good moral grounds for leaders to appeal to religious reasons as (partial) bases of justification for why followers should accept COVID policies. In the course of the argument, this essay also highlights how contemporary political theory can enrich discussions about the distinctions between coercion, manipulation, and leadership. It thereby give insight not only into the ethics of leadership but also—at least by the lights of central theories of leadership like that of James MacGregor Burns (1978)—into whether and how appeals to religious reasons can figure into genuine exercises of leadership, in contrast with mere instances of the wielding of social power.

Keywords

Religion, COVID-19, legitimacy, public justification, religious diversity, political liberalism

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Introduction

The COVID-19 infection surfaced in December 2019 and spread rapidly across the globe, leading the World Health Organization to declare a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020a). During the pandemic, public health leaders advised individuals to abide by health practices that might help slow or stop the spread of the disease, like frequently washing their hands, social distancing, quarantining after possible exposures to the virus, and getting vaccinated (WHO, 2020b). While some were easily persuaded to comply, resistance to best practices and preventive measures against COVID-19 has been reported worldwide. A Stanford study reported that approximately four in ten individuals in the United States did not comply with social distancing recommendations (Moore et al., 2020). In Italy, researchers found that only half of 894 respondents were fully compliant with required social distancing measures (Briscese et al., 2020). Despite only having one confirmed case of COVID-19 in mid-March 2020, Jordan found itself managing a larger outbreak after a wedding in which 76 out of 350 guests were infected (Yusef et al., 2020). In June 2020, a groom in India became a "superspreader" at his own wedding. He died from COVID-19 two days after his wedding, and 100 guests later tested positive for the virus (Zargar, 2020).

Today more than ever leaders concerned with public health must persuade people to get the COVID-19 vaccination to control the pandemic in the future—but the public has had a mixed response to accepting the vaccine (Lazarus et al., 2021). If appeals to scientific reasons are not effective at bringing about observance of public health best-practices on their own, leaders may consider also appealing to citizens' religious commitments to encourage them to cooperate. For instance, leaders in the Singaporian government appealed to religious reasons as part of their public justification for COVID policies. There, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore—an official state agency charged with advising the president on matters pertaining to Islamic belief and worship—issued an authoritative ruling on Islamic law (a *fatwa*) which cited teachings of the Prophet Muhammad as reasons for why (among other things) public places should be closed in response to the outbreak of the pandemic (Bakaram, 2020; see also Alyanak, 2020). While even secular onlookers may be pleased at the immediate outcomes that appeals to religious reasons like this one help support, many may worry that those such serve as inappropriate means for achieving those results because they appear to cross a moral line of separation between "church" and state that leaders charged with representing public governmental institutions are morally bound to respect. Others may also be concerned that allowing appeals to religious reasons in cases like this, where the outcomes seem positive, sets a negative precedent for the long term. They may, for instance, point to cases where government leaders use the religious beliefs of a majority in order to justify harm to religious minorities—like that described by Prasad (2020) in his study of how Hindu nationalist leaders in India used religious premises as grounds for stoking prejudice against Muslim minorities. Examples like these raise the concern that appeals to religious reasons may devolve into dangerous, ideologically-motivated populist rhetoric.

While the problems with leaders making appeals to religious reasons are perhaps most notable in the political domain, where leaders have the coercive power of the state at their disposal, many of the underlying ethical principles that make those cases of religious appeals concerning also apply to other contexts of leadership. While other leaders do not have the coercive power of the state at their disposal, they are often still responsible for setting and enforcing group policies. The power they wield over their followers is thus often subject to ethical evaluation in ways that approximate the political case. It is not surprising, then, that many may feel that—even outside of the domain of politics—there is something morally suspect about leaders serving in secular contexts appealing to

religious reasons as bases on which to secure followers' compliance with COVID guidelines. In analogy with the political case, such appeals may appear to inappropriately cross an institutional boundary that separates the public, secular ends of non-religious organizations from the private, religious commitments of the members who belong to those organizations. More specifically—and as Tourish and Tourish (2010) highlight in their argument against leaders' implementation of "spirituality at work" programs—leaders who cross the boundaries between "church" and their secular organizations may seem to fail to show respect for the autonomy of diverse religious and non-religious followers.

In this paper, I examine the arguments for and against appealing to faith-based reasons as grounds for compliance with COVID guidelines and conclude that there need not be anything morally problematic about leaders making such appeals, even in secular contexts. Indeed, I argue that such appeals can constitute important expressions of respect for religious followers. Critically, however, I point out that an appeal to reasons grounded in one religious tradition is only permissible when it is matched with a variety of other religious and secular justifications that speak to the diverse followers who will be affected by the salient policy. While my argument has wider implications for the use of religious reasons in other leadership contexts, I attend to the case of COVID-19 because of its urgency, and in order to make the analysis more focused and concrete. In making my argument, however, I further the work of other leadership scholars like Lindsay Thompson (2004) and Douglas Hicks (2002), who suggest that it is a mistake for leaders to avoid engagement with followers' diverse religious perspectives and contend that leaders should instead regard religious differences as a significant form of diversity that—like other forms—requires attention and accommodation.

The paper also makes a significant contribution to the field of leadership studies by introducing new tools for analysis that have not yet been seriously implemented in the field. While contemporary political philosophers have done decades of work analyzing the ethics of the use of power in contexts of moral and religious pluralism, a search through leading journals in leadership studies shows little evidence of scholarly engagement with the prominent political theories that I examine and bring to bear on leadership issues in this essay. As I discuss in the conclusion, these political theories help enrich discussions about the distinctions between coercion, manipulation, and leadership and thereby give insight not only into the ethics of leadership but also—at least by the lights of central theorists of leadership scholars like James MacGregor Burns (1978)—into whether and how appeals to religious reasons can figure into genuine exercise of "leadership," in contrast with the mere instances of the wielding of social power.

My argument proceeds as follows. In the Practical Argument for Religious Appeals section, I begin by highlighting the morally beneficial outcomes of appealing to religious reasons as bases for why citizens should observe COVID best practices. In the Political Liberalism and the "Exclusivist" Approach to Religious Reasons section, I discuss an objection to this outcome-oriented argument for permitting appeals to religious reasons that is apt to be advanced by *exclusivist* political theorists like John Rawls and Jonathon Quong. These theorists object to civic leaders' using appeals to religious reasons because they believe that (i) in a pluralistic society, public policies should be justified (only) by reference to shared, religiously "neutral" justifications and that (ii) secular leaders' who rely on religious reasons they don't themselves endorse would be acting manipulatively in offering those reasons as bases for why others should abide by salient policies. I connect these political theorists' argument against the use of religious appeals in politics to broader arguments about the ethics of leadership in religiously diverse contexts. In the Preliminary Objections and Responses to Political Liberals' "Exclusivist" Approach section, I draw on the work of Gerald Gaus and Kevin Vallier to develop an *inclusivist* alternative to Rawls and Quong's exclusivist position. According to this inclusivist position, there is nothing objectionable about leaders' appealing to religious reasons as

bases for support of COVID policies, so long as they also appeal to other reasons—including scientific reasons—that are appropriately persuasive to secular citizens. To the contrary, I argue that since such appeals to religious reasons may produce morally beneficial outcomes, and are an appropriate way of showing respect for religious believers' autonomy, leaders can and often should offer such reasons as bases for why religious follower should comply with COVID policies.

The practical argument for religious appeals

Religious communities have had mixed responses to COVID-19 public health guidelines. While many have been willing to abide by those guidelines, a significant number have also appealed to their religious commitments as reasons for resisting them. Thus, for instance, while many Christian churches transitioned from using in-person to online weekly services, the US also saw massive protests to state mandates to close weekly religious services that were based on the religiously-grounded conviction that churches are "essential businesses" that should be treated as on a par with grocery stores and laundromats (which states permitted to stay open; Gjelten, 2020). In the global context, the world also saw religious institutions take very different approaches to, for example, the performance of religious pilgrimages. While Saudia Arabia imposed severe restrictions on Muslims' *hajj* pilgrimage to the Ka'ba in Mecca, religious clerics in Iran resisted governmental and global advisories to shut down religious shrines in Qom. Insider videos later showed massive numbers of dead bodies in bags in Qom's morgues because there was (reportedly) no room left for proper burial sites for the many who had perished from COVID-19 (Singh, 2020). Leaders who are able to engage with those who resist COVID-19 policies on religious bases by offering them counterposing religious reasons that point in favor of compliance may be able to save lives that would, but for such compliance, likely be lost.

As the examples in the last paragraph begin to suggest, the significance of appealing to individuals' religious commitments in the context of a highly contagious disease like COVID is especially pronounced because many faith-based practices are oriented around *public* rituals and gatherings (Durkheim, 1912/2008).[1] These may take the form of weekly meetings—like the Friday prayer celebrated by Muslims, or synagogue or church services attended by Jews or Christians, respectively, the celebration of holy days (like, for example, the Hindu celebration of Holi), or other religious commemorations and rituals like wedding ceremonies or pilgrimages (for instance, the Muslim *hajj* to Mecca). These public gatherings not only serve as potential sites of "super-spreader" events that put the religious attendees at risk, but also make all those who come into contact with those attendees in other contexts vulnerable to exposure. Moreover, masses of people are committed to the religious traditions that encourage participation in these public practices.

While secularly-oriented academic settings may easily leave researchers and scholars with the impression that religious believers represent only a minority of voices in global society, this is far from being the case. Worldwide, a vast majority—about 84% of the world's population—ascribe to a religious tradition (PEW, 2017). According to PEW estimates, there are roughly 2.3 billion Christians (1.3 billion of whom are Catholics), 2 billion Muslims, 1.1 billion Hindus, 0.5 billion Buddhists, 0.4 billion followers of traditional folk religions, 25 million Sikhs, 10 million Jews, and 34 million adherents to the Bahá'í, Jain, Taoist and other smaller traditions. Only 16% or 1.2 billion people assert no religious affiliation. Given the large numbers of individuals who subscribe to religious commitments, and the ways in which these commitments encourage them to engage in publicly interactive practices, it is incredibly important for leaders concerned with public health to be able to secure religious believers' endorsement of best practices related to highly contagious and deadly disease like COVID-19. Indeed, scholarly studies like those undertaken by Ngwa et al.

(2017) on the spread and containment of other diseases, like cholera, highlight how important aligning public health practices with individuals' religious commitments can be to promoting public health outcomes.

Appeals to religious beliefs to encourage compliance with COVID policies can take many forms. In some cases, such appeals may cite faith-based injunctions and practices that are (even within the context of the tradition) specifically targeted to the promotion of health. For instance, Iranian leaders working in Qom at the time of the outbreak could have appealed to sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (*hadiths*) like "If you hear of an outbreak of plague in a land, do not enter it; but if the if plague outbreaks out in a place while you are in it, do not leave that place" (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhari (n. d.)) or "those with contagious diseases should be kept away from those who are healthy" (*ibid*: 5773–5775). Leaders may also make reference to historical religious figures and practices that religious believers might be inspired to emulate. For instance, leaders working with resistant Christian followers could make reference to Martin Luther's sixteenth century treatise on the importance of being pro-active in the fight against the bubonic plague that racked his community (Miller, 2020), and those engaging with Muslim individuals might make reference to the Arba'iniya, a practice of taking 40 days of isolation after exposure to a contagious disease that was recommended by Ibn Sina (980–1037) and later referred to and adopted by merchants from Venice as the practice of "quarantine" (Hatim, 2020).

Additionally, appeals to religious reasons may make reference to general moral principles like, for instance, the Jewish and Christian mandate to "Love your neighbor as yourself" (VanderWeele, 2020), the Buddhist injunction to emulate the bodhisattva's spirit of compassion (Sang, 2021), the Hindu virtue of *daya*—which concerns the desire to mitigate the suffering of others (Devgun, 2021), or the Muslim principle of *darar*—which highlights the importance of avoiding injury to others (Mustafa, 2014). Even when religious practitioners are not fully convinced of scientific reports of the harms of COVID-19 (e.g., its contagiousness and salient mortality rates), or the benefits of vaccination, appeal to these principles may encourage believers to cooperate with COVID policies by drawing attention to the moral significance of causing even (allegedly) "small" chances of harm to others by being unnecessarily incautious. Finally, a leader might highlight to religious individuals their commitment to religious practices that, although perhaps not originally oriented towards physical well-being, turn out to have beneficial health outcomes. For example, she might appeal to the Buddhist practice of greeting others by pressing one's hands together in front of one's chest as a hygienic alternative to shaking hands (Sang, 2021).[2]

Despite reasons for thinking that appeals to religious commitments could contribute to the achievement of morally desirable social outcomes like the containment of COVID-19, leaders working in secular contexts may feel wary of using religious appeals as a means to achieve those outcomes. In the sections following, I consider arguments offered by prominent liberal political theorists that may be able to explain the moral motivations behind this hesitance. I then go on to contend that these arguments are ultimately unpersuasive.

Before getting to the substance of my argument, however, one might reasonably ask why—even if one is concerned primarily with outcomes—other means of persuasion would not work just as well, or better, to effect the same morally desirable results. For instance, why should leaders aiming to stem the spread of COVID-19 not simply focus on ramping up the publicization of scientific research supporting relevant public health directive, it is important to first note that a pure focus on scientific research regarding the potential harms of the spread of COVID-19 does not provide an argument for why relevant stakeholders should comply with COVID mandates absent some appeal to premises that explain why they should care about the prevention of those harms. To explain why individuals should care about the prevention of those harms, moreover, leaders will often need to

rely on moral premises—concerning, for example, individual responsibility for promoting the common good. Since many individuals look to their religious commitments as sources of moral guidance, pure appeal to scientific research is unlikely to be effective without some reference to salient, religiously-informed, moral ideas.

Second, in low and middle-income countries (LMIC) where—whether due to historical colonial oppression or otherwise—governments have not been able to provide average citizens with much formal scientific training, citizens may have comparatively less access to, and so reason to trust, the advice of scientific experts than they do the moral recommendations of their religious traditions. In these contexts, appeals to religious commitments may be all the more important to motivating compliance. Sturgis et al. (2021), for instance, find that in populations where there is a lower level of consensus around the trustworthiness of scientific institutions, individuals are significantly less likely to be confident about getting vaccinated, and a majority of countries in which they find such a lack of consensus are low and middle-income. Insofar as, for example, many of these countries have Muslim majority populations, it stands to reason that appeals to Islamic principles and practices may be particularly fruitful.

Of course, it is not only citizens in LMIC countries that may be skeptical of COVID recommendations that scientific institutions put forward: in the US, conservative Republicans report significantly less trust in scientists (AAAS, 2018), and are comparatively more likely to resist relevant recommended COVID policies, than their more liberal Democratic counterparts (Wright, 2021). In the last half century, religious voters—particularly white evangelicals—have increasingly identified with the Republican party (Putnam et al., 2012), and so appeals to religious values may help persuade this segment of the American public to comply with COVID policies. Whereas religious appeals may function in some LMIC countries to counteract a lack of trust in science that is rooted in a lack of scientific education, religious appeals aimed at these conservative American believers are more likely to function as a (partial) remedy for suspicions they harbor about biases that (allegedly) influence scientific institutions and the policy recommendations they issue (Goldenberg, 2021; Levy, 2019). Even among Republicans and Democrats with the same level of scientific education, Republicans appear to be significantly more skeptical than their Democratic counterparts about, for example, vaccines (Joslyn and Sylvester, 2019) and consensus views on climate change (Funk and Kennedy, 2016). In fact, Kahan (2015) shows that among conservatives, higher scores on the Ordinary Science Intelligence scale actually corresponds with *higher* rates of rejecting consensus views about climate change—apparently because scientifically educated conservatives are more likely to trust their independent critiques of "established" scientific views. Rather than being grounded in a general ignorance about, or rejection of, "scientific" knowledge as such, conservative voters' resistance to scientific experts' policy recommendations seems to be better explained by their belief that those experts' claims are distorted by bias: on many issues, conservative Republicans are significantly less likely than liberal Democrats to have confidence that scientists will "act in the interests of the public," report findings "even if they go against the sponsor of the research," and give "impartial" evidence on matters of public debate (AAAS, 2018: 19).

In the case of COVID policies, there is at least strong anecdotal evidence to suggest that conservative religious believers' skepticism about those policies is predicated on the assumption that relevant scientific "experts" act in collusion with a hazardous secular, liberal political agenda. Contending that the public ought to be guided "faith not fear" (Tallman, 2020), some evangelicals allege that public health leaders fail to put appropriate trust in God's protective providence, and aim instead to utilize the disease as an excuse for a political grab for power or (more generally) a justification for liberal governmental overreach (Babie, 2021; Dias and Graham, 2021; Neuberger, 2021; Starr 2020; for background, see also Perry et al., 2020). In this context, leaders who are able to show

how relevant COVID policies can be justified by reference to religious values—for example, love of neighbor (Vander Weele, 2020)—may be able to relieve the suspicion that those policies must necessarily issue from self-interested or liberally biased political motives. Other researchers have found that conservatives are more likely to accept global warming statistics when they are framed in a way that highlights their compatibility with conservative free-market values (Dixon et al., 2017; see also Hart and Nisbet, 2012), and so it is reasonable to expect that presenting COVID policies in a way that highlights their congruence with conservative religious values may facilitate greater acceptance of those policies than could be procured through arguments that are formulated in more purely scientific terms.

Political liberalism and the "Exclusivist" approach to religious reasons

Even when the ends one aims at are morally praiseworthy, not all means of achieving those ends are equally morally commendable. Thus, it would be intuitively inappropriate for political leaders to induce citizens to conform with COVID policies by adding compliance-inducing hallucinogenics into the public water system—even if that could significantly slow the spread of COVID. Prominent political theorists who advocate for what has come to be termed "public reason" liberalism explain this intuition by arguing that civic leaders should respect citizens as rational, autonomous moral agents. Drawing on the moral insights of Kantian ethical theory, they contend that the expression of such respect calls out for those leaders to engage with citizens' powers of reason—their abilities to appreciate evidence, and to make logical inferences and judgments on the basis of that evidence— when attempting to gain their compliance with salient public policies As a result, they argue, leaders should "publicly justify" those policies by appealing to reasons that citizens can reasonably be expected to accept in the process of justifying their enforcement of those laws (see Gaus 2003 for an overview). While public reason liberals' theories are addressed to evaluate the ethics of political leaders' conduct, their theories apply in predictable ways to leaders who are, like political authorities, charged with settling on and enforcing policies that others are compelled to abide by. The principles of public reason liberalism suggest that leaders should only adopt policies that followers could be reasonably persuaded to autonomously endorse, and that—in the process of justifying those policies— they should thus appeal to reasons that those followers can reasonably be expected to accept.

Public reason liberals would argue that, just like it would be a violation of individuals' rational autonomy to induce obedience to COVID policies by way of relying on compliance-inducing hallucinogenics, so also it would be a violation of that autonomy to induce such obedience by way of, for instance, pressuring individuals into accepting the tenets of a particular religious tradition that is friendly towards those policies. Of course, I have not claimed that leaders should use that strategy; instead, I will suggest only that they should appeal to religious justifications as reasons for why citizens who *already accept* particular religious commitments should also comply with COVID mandates. Nevertheless, some public reason liberals—in particular, "exclusivist" political liberals who draw on the work of John Rawls (a central political philosopher of the last half-century)—may object even to this limited reliance on religious reasons. In this section, I outline political liberals' argument for excluding appeals to religious reasons as grounds for why citizens should comply with public policies, and apply that argument to cases where leaders more generally may (or may not) rely on religious reasons to persuade individuals to adhere to COVID guidelines.

Public reason liberalism and public justification. To begin, it is important to understand the moral principles that motivate the wider approach of public reason liberalism of which John Rawls's ("exclusivist") political liberalism is a part. As noted above, public reason liberals hold that respect

for others requires public justification of public policies, and they draw the connection between respect and public justification primarily by way of appealing to the importance of showing regard for others' rational autonomy. The importance of showing respect for others' autonomy is, at least in the Euro-American context, most famously explained by the eighteenth century ethicist Immanuel Kant. Unlike (say) dogs or hammers, Kant pointed out, persons have a capacity for rational autonomy: they can understand and appreciate moral and practical reasons, and are able to govern their own conduct in accordance with those reasons. As a result, Kant argued, respect for persons *as persons* requires one not to simply compel them to conform to one's own ends in the way one may perhaps legitimately do with (say) a dog or hammer. Instead, one ought (at least presumptively) to allow persons' freedom to govern their own choices, and so ensure that they are able to rationally consent to any imposition of power to which one subjects them (Wood, 1999). Kantian theory thus suggests that showing regard for the value of individuals' autonomy compels leaders to earn individuals' consent to salient policies by publicly justifying those policies to those followers by reference to reasons that those individuals could reasonably be expected to accept.

Political liberals interpret the general requirement for public justification in a particular way: they hold that public policies must be justified by—and only by—reference to non-religious, "public reasons" that are mutually shared among "reasonable" persons, where "reasonable" persons are defined as individuals who are mutually motivated to cooperate with others, as free and equal citizens, on fair terms, and who acknowledge "the fact of reasonable pluralism" (a term I explain in more detail below). Next, I outline the argument that Rawls advances in *Political Liberalism* (1993) for why it is important for civic leaders to rely (only) on shared, non-religious "public" reasons of this sort in the course of justifying public policies.

Political liberalism and "public" reasons

Rawls begins his argument by pointing out an apparent paradox that arises in trying to formulate a conception of justice that shows respect for the importance of citizens' political autonomy in a consistent and coherent way. In alignment with the Kantian principles outlined above, Rawls argues that such a conception of justice must be able to earn the free assent of (at least) "reasonable" citizens—but, as he points out, it must also simultaneously protect their rights of free thinking and liberty of conscience. Rawls suggests that these two requirements seem to undermine each other. When liberty of conscience is protected, then (according to Rawls), the "burdens of judgment"— roughly, the everyday obstacles and complexities involved with reasoning about difficult, abstract moral, religious, and philosophical questions—will lead even reasonable citizens who desire to cooperate with each other on fair terms to hold conflicting "comprehensive doctrines"—that is, conflicting religious and philosophical worldviews about what constitutes a "good," flourishing life and about the standards of personal morality one should adhere to achieve that life (1993: xxxix, 56). As Rawls suggests, this "fact of reasonable pluralism"—that is, the fact that the operation of the burden of judgments lead even "reasonable" citizens to ascribe to diverse comprehensive doctrines—seems, on the surface, to prevent such citizens from being able to mutually assent to a common conception of justice. It appears, then, that a conception of justice that protects freedom of conscience won't be able to remain mutually accepted (even among "reasonable" citizens), and that a conception of justice that wants to remain mutually accepted can't allow freedom of conscience (*ibid:* xxxix).

To resolve this paradox and thus to maintain a way to consistently show respect for citizens' political autonomy, Rawls proposes that political leaders should justify public policies by reference to what he terms a "political" conception of justice (*ibid:* xlff). Rather than appealing to controversial

ideas from citizens' varied comprehensive doctrines, a political conception of justice works up its content from shared resources implicit in the public political culture of a democracy (*ibid:* 100, see also 199–200), including, for instance, the concepts of political freedom and equality and (as Rawls puts it) forms of reasoning "found in common sense" and well-established "methods and conclusions of science" (*ibid:* 67, 224). Though a democratic regime that protects liberty of conscience cannot interfere with the formation of citizens' comprehensive doctrines, it can legitimately regulate the content of the public political culture. Thus, Rawls suggests, a political conception of justice whose content is worked up from ideas implicit in the public political culture of a democracy can be mutually accepted among "reasonable" citizens, even in a regime that protects their liberty of conscience. Since (according to Rawls) the value of political autonomy can only be consistently respected if public institutions rely on such a shared, political conception of justice to justify public policies, political leaders who respect others' political autonomy will only offer justifications for public policies that are drawn from such a conception. Rawls calls these justifications—which draw only on shared political values, "common sense" and well-established scientific conclusions— "public reasons," and concludes that political leaders should not appeal to controversial premises from comprehensive religious, moral, or philosophical doctrines (*ibid:* 212–254). At least on standard interpretations of Rawls's view, the Singaporian government's deployment of Islamic reasons (regarding the Prophet Muhammad's teachings) as justifications for why citizens should comply with COVID-19 policies was thus impermissible: those reasons could not be commonly accepted by the religiously diverse "reasonable" citizens residing in Singapore who would be subject to those policies.

Insofar as leaders of secular or public institutions are, like political authorities, charged with settling on and administering COVID policies that religiously diverse groups will be compelled to abide by, the arguments discussed above make it relatively clear why they should not rely on reasons that find home *only* in some one, particular religious comprehensive doctrine to justify the imposition of COVID policies. Such reliance on principles drawn from a particular religious doctrine would not be "public" reasons, and so would deprive other, reasonable members of a group of grounds on which they, too, could also freely consent to those policies.

One difficulty with Rawls's argument is that it does not make clear why leaders cannot appropriately make use of *any* religious reasons at all to help gain support for COVID policies. Even if respect for citizens' autonomy requires that, for instance, civic leaders in Singapore should not appeal *only* to Islamic principles to persuade citizens to support COVID policies, it is far from obvious why his argument would imply that they could not appropriately appeal to Islamic reasons *along with* a variety of other scientific and religious reasons that other citizens can accept as bases for accepting those policies. Indeed, as we will see in the next section, this is precisely the kind of "inclusivist" approach to religious reasons that *convergence theorists* suggest. According to these theorists, public institutions do not show any objectionable disregard for individuals' autonomy if they draw on a *variety* of (unshared) religious and philosophical reasons as grounds for why different citizens should commonly "converge" on the same policy proposals. Before discussing this "inclusivist" convergence approach in more detail in the next section, however, I close this section by examining why political liberals have typically rejected it and thus continued to insist that religious reasons should be excluded from the repertoire of public justifications for why citizens should comply with public policies like those aimed to stem the spread of COVID-19.

Public reasons, sincerity, and the exclusion of religious reasons

In Quong (2011) Jonathon Quong provides a more in-depth defense of Rawls's "exclusivist" argument regarding the use of religious reasons in processes of public justification. According to Quong, the underlying principle that calls out for the public justification of policies—that is, respect for other's autonomy—requires more than just that leaders offer others considerations that those others *believe* count as reasons to accept a policy. Rather, Quong's argument suggests, respect for other's autonomy also entails a *Sincerity Requirement*: it makes it important that the reasons that leaders use as means for persuasion be reasons that those *leaders* themselves regard as plausible (*ibid,* Chapter 9). Since, in a pluralistic society, a given leader may reject the religious doctrines of relevant followers as implausible, it follows from Quong's argument that she should not appeal to such doctrines as though they served as actual reasons for why others should abide by COVID policies, for example, a policy to require COVID-19 vaccinations. Indeed, according to Quong, appeal to such reasons would in this kind of case constitute a form of manipulation rather than a method of genuine *justification* of her use of power to her constituents.

Why might respect for others' autonomy ethically preclude a leader from relying on considerations—including, in particular, religious considerations—that she does not herself sincerely regard as plausible? To illustrate the answer, consider an example. Suppose that a family tells their young child, Sam, that Santa Claus exists and that—whether by fluke or malintent—Sam's belief is never corrected, so that he grows up continuing to believe in Santa and trying to please him. Suppose further that Sam comes to believe that Santa Claus wants him to get a COVID vaccination. In this situation, a leader—say, an employer—could use appeals to Sam's beliefs about Santa Claus to persuade him to accept a policy requiring vaccinations. However, insofar as that leader believes that Sam would be accepting that policy on the basis of false considerations and phony reasons, making reference to claims about Santa Claus as "justifications" for why he should comply them appears to amount to a form of insincere manipulation. After all (as far as this leader would be concerned) in making the salient appeals to Santa Claus, she would not be offering Sam any *genuine* reasons for assenting to COVID policies at all. Instead, she would (it seems) be taking advantage of—and so manipulating—(what she regards as) his false beliefs; she would purchase his cooperation, but only by handing him play money. Quong's argument suggests that, even if this leader's appeals to Santa Claus were successful in coaxing Sam to abide by her COVID policies, they would still be morally problematic for the same basic moral reason that reliance on compliance-inducing hallucinogenics would be: in both instances, the salient strategy of "persuasion" would still seem to treat Sam as a passive subject to be subdued into compliance, rather than genuinely expressing respect for him as an equal, rationally autonomous agent.

Neither Quong nor Rawls themselves contend that religious beliefs are in fact implausible or irrational in the way that Sam's belief about Santa Claus is. To the contrary, they attempt to remain neutral on that issue because—as mentioned in the prior explanation of Rawls's original argument for exclusivism about religious reasons—they want to insist that the burdens of judgment make it possible for reasonable, conscientious citizens to come to hold to diverse religious and philosophical views. Nevertheless, Quong highlights that this very diversity will lead many leaders to reject religious doctrines as untrue and implausible. If his Sincerity Requirement is correct, then it would follow that such leaders should not appeal to religious reasons as bases for why others should accept COVID policies.

Preliminary objections and responses to political liberals' "Exclusivist" approach

Even if, as Quong's Sincerity Requirement suggests, leaders who reject a particular religious tradition's doctrines should not personally utilize appeals to those doctrines as a means of persuading

relevant religious followers to comply with COVID guidelines, one might press Quong by asking why the Sincerity Requirement should stop leaders who *do* belong to the same tradition as salient religious followers from doing the same. For example, even if secular public officials in Singapore should not make appeal to Islamic reasons, what about the ethical constraints of sincerity stop *religiously committed* public officials within the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore from doing so?

Here, Quong may respond by arguing that such appeals to religious reasons by religiously committed leaders are still problematic insofar as they occur in the context of institutional structures that involve a religiously diverse constituency. For one thing, Quong might contend that insofar as, for example, secular citizens see themselves as represented by the Singaporian government—of which the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore is officially a part—then, when religiously-inclined leaders within that government agency appeal to (what those secular citizens regard as) "spurious" religious arguments to coax their religious peers into "submission," that will undermine the former, secular citizens' ability to sincerely relate to the latter, Islamic citizens (who they know are targeted by those arguments) on terms of equal respect within the context of their shared governmental institutions. Second and relatedly, Quong might argue that insofar as a leader represents a religiously pluralistic group, the members of that group ought to be able to sincerely "stand behind" and endorse the language that he uses in his capacity as a leader of that group. To draw on the beliefs of a particular subdivision of the group as grounds of public justification for a policy would, Quong might argue, betray a kind of disrespect on his part for other members of the group who are therein deprived of the ability to feel fully and genuinely represented by his leadership.

Even assuming that political liberals are able to offer an adequate reply to this last concern about whom the sincerity requirement applies to, other problems for their approach still arise. One moral drawback of Quong and Rawls's "exclusivist" conclusion about religious reasons in the context of COVID-19 policy is that—for the reasons discussed in the Practical Argument for Religious Appeals section—it may hinder a leader's ability to most effectively stem suffering and death from the disease. Here, it is particularly relevant to highlight that while political liberals often assume that appeals to scientific results—at least, ones that are not controversial within the scientific community—will be commonly acceptable to citizens from a wide variety of religious and non-religious backgrounds (Rawls 1993: 67, 224), the discussion at the end of the Practical Argument for Religious Appealssection suggested that that is not always the case, particularly in contexts of lower and middle-income countries where science education is less well developed. If leaders appeal only to (allegedly) "shared," neutral scientific reasons then—especially in these contexts—that may thus not produce the level of compliance with COVID policies that could be achieved by including appeals to religious reasons, and lives that could have been saved may be lost.

While political liberals might well lament this negative extrinsic outcome of their approach, they may still also continue to defend its intrinsic moral merits by suggesting that citizens who do not accept COVID policies on the basis of scientific reasons—and *require* specifically religious reasons to be persuaded to comply—are acting *unreasonably* in doing so (Kappel, 2021). Since (as noted above) political liberals think that it is only morally essential that "reasonable" citizens should be able to give their autonomous consent to public policies, the (alleged) "unreasonability" of resistant religious citizens would function (within political liberals' framework) to morally "offset" the negative outcomes that result from those citizens' failure to accept salient COVID policies. However, especially in the context of the lower and middle income countries that I drew attention to in the section on "The Practical Argument for Religious Appeals"—where citizens may not have been able to get the kind of formal scientific education that would justify automatic trust in scientific experts—citizens may be completely "reasonable" in not simply (blindly) accepting the recommendations of those experts. More generally, it does not seem "unreasonable" for citizens to want ethical reasons to supplement purely scientific, empirical

claims in arguments that are meant to guide their reactions to those latter claims, nor for them to seek out such ethical reasons that connect with their most basic religious commitments.

Convergence theory and "inclusivist" approaches to religious reasons

In light of the difficulties with political liberal's "exclusivist" approach to the use of religious reasons, one may wish to seek out a more religiously inclusive alternative. "Convergence" theorists like Kevin Vallier and Gerald Gaus (2009; see also Vallier 2014 and Gaus 1996, 2010) provide such an "inclusivist" option. Vallier and Gaus distinguish themselves from "exclusivist" political liberals like Quong and Rawls—who they label as "consensus" theorists—by rejecting the idea that citizens must consent to public policies on the basis of shared, religiously neutral, "public" reasons. Instead, convergence theorists hold that it is enough for diverse members of the public to be able to "converge" on the same policies on the basis of different justifications that are motivated by different comprehensive doctrines. Convergence theorists thus conclude that, for instance, government leaders in the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore might well be morally justified in making appeals to Islamic reasons as justifications for why Muslim citizens should comply with COVID policies, so long as Singaporian officials also provide other citizens with other moral and scientific reasons that *they* too find adequately plausible for why they should comply.

This "convergence" approach to public justification has the benefit of potentially producing morally superior results for public health in that it has the potential to reach and persuade a wider variety of religious citizens to comply with COVID guidelines than political liberals' more "exclusivist" alternative. However, convergence theorists argue for their approach on the basis of its intrinsic moral qualities, rather than (just) its morally beneficial outcomes. Like political liberals, convergence theorists subscribe to the basic principles of public reason liberalism: they hold that respect for citizens' civic autonomy requires that public policies should be publicly justified to citizens by way of appeal to their capacities for reason. As a result, convergence theorists would—like political liberals—reject approaches to enforcement that rely on, for example, merely drugging or manipulating others into accepting policies, regardless of the potential for morally beneficial outcomes (see, e.g., Gaus 1996: 139). That granted, convergence theorists offer a wider, more inclusive conception of what an appeal to an individuals' capacity for "reason" can involve than political liberals do. As we will now see, this allows them to deny political liberals' claim that secular or differently religiously committed leaders' appeals to others' religious reasons must by necessity amount to manipulation.

Convergence theorists begin their argument by pointing out that it is possible to regard someone else's belief as false and nevertheless also acknowledge that, in arriving at that ("false") belief, he employed a respectable and reasonable process of reflection that serves to give him rational *justification* for believing in the way he does (Vallier 2014: 103*ff* and Gaus 1996: 30*ff*). More specifically, Gerald Gaus argues that secular (and differently religious committed) individuals' can regard others' ("false") beliefs as rational in the sense of being "openly justified" (Gaus 1996: 30*ff*). To regard someone as "openly justified" in holding to a belief, one need not regard that belief as true; on the other hand, however, not simply any claim—religious or otherwise—that an individual sincerely believes will count as "openly justified" for him. Rather, according to Gaus, openly justified beliefs are (roughly) beliefs that rationally cohere with each other, and that could be rationally maintained given the addition of adequate, easily attainable information together with basically reliable processes of inference (Gaus 1996: 30–32; see Billingham (2016) for helpful discussion). So long as one regards (say) someone else's religious belief in God or the prophethood of Mohammad as being "openly justified" for him, convergence theorists suggest, one can also reasonably regard his acceptance of that belief as an expression of his exercise of rational autonomy. Moreover, so long as one can appreciate and respect that that individual's acceptance

of that religious belief constitutes a manifestation of his exercise of rational autonomy in this way, convergence theorists hold, appeal to that belief as a basis for why he should comply with COVID policies constitutes a positive expression of respect for him as a rational autonomous agent, rather than a manipulative pretense designed merely to secure his submission.

The requirement that leaders should only appeal to considerations that are (at least) openly justified for those they are concerned to persuade rules out manipulative uses of "reason" like that that appears to be at issue in the case where a leader appeals to Sam's beliefs about Santa Claus as method of procuring his assent to COVID policies. Because Sam's belief in Santa Claus could be straightforwardly corrected by easily attainable information, it would plausibly fail to qualify as "openly justified" to Sam in Gaus's sense. However, the kind of religious commitments that leaders might appeal to to persuade religious followers to comply with COVID policies need neither be— nor (as a result) be *regarded* to be—like Sam's belief in Santa Claus.

To begin, consider the variety of religious principles that concern the importance of non-injury and compassion that were cited in the Practical Argument for Religious Appeals section—for example, Jewish and Christians principles like loving your neighbor as yourself, the Hindu principle of *daya*, or the Muslim principle of *darar*. These ethical principles have wide resonance between religious and secular traditions, and it should not be difficult for secular (and differently religiously committed) leaders to recognize that those who grow up in a religious tradition may arrive at these principles in ways that approximate the manners in which their own, similarly general moral principles have also been reasonably and reflectively developed. Like in the secular case, religious individuals who accept these general moral principles are not typically simply brainwashed or hypnotized into accepting them. Instead, they normally come to endorse these principles because of, for instance, how they cohere with the examples given by morally virtuous exemplars—in the religious case, religious saints, prophets, or members of the religious community—or moral stories or parables which are, in the religious case, often contained in scriptures or holy texts. Secular (and differently religiously committed leaders), should thus be able to regard others' commitment to these general, religious moral principles as reasonable and "openly justified" in much the same way as they would regard their own moral commitments to such general principles as justified.

Second and more generally, both philosophers of religion and theologians working within various religious traditions have gone to great lengths to formulate rational arguments for the plausibility of the central doctrines of their "faith," including both inductive and deductive theoretical arguments for the existence of a deity (or deities) and (where applicable) historical arguments concerning the relationship of that deity (or deities) to more particular scriptures and practices.[3] While many religious believers may not initially come to their beliefs by way of an examination of these philosophical and theological arguments, those arguments can still serve to render their beliefs openly justified in Gaus's sense because "open justification" is tied to a counterfactual about what an individual *would* be able to rational maintain given the addition of adequate, easily attainable information together with basically reliable processes of inference. The existence of carefully worked out, rational arguments like those developed by philosophers and theologians makes it the case that an individual's belief in the core tenets of her tradition need not—like with Sam's belief in Santa Claus—be easily undermined by the addition of new, quickly attainable information or the use of basically reliable processes of inference. Moreover, insofar as a person's belief in a central religious tenet—for example, let's say, the prophethood of Mohammed—is openly justified, that person's acceptance of more specific propositions that follow from belief in that central tenet—for example, acceptance of Mohammed's directive to not enter a land where one has heard of an outbreak of a plague (see the Practical Argument for Religious Appeals section)—will also be rendered "openly justified."

Third and finally, even when individuals' religious commitments depend on sources that are more difficult for outsiders to immediately appreciate as consonant with norms of rationality—say, for instance, commitments that are based in religious experience or trust in religious authorities, texts, or practices—there is an extensive literature in contemporary philosophy of religion that offers detailed analyses of how reliance on these sources can, despite initial appearances, accord with rationally coherent standards of belief formation. For example, Christopher Eberle (2002) and Alvin Plantinga (2000, 2015) make careful, thorough arguments comparing the epistemic merits of religious individuals' trust in their sense or experience of (a particular conception of) God with that of our ordinary trust in our other senses and rational capacities, for example, our sense perception and memory. A key insight that Eberle and Plantinga bring to the fore is that—whatever the rational merits of the former processes of religious belief formation—they do not appear to present any special problems as rational bases for belief-formation that are not also shared (in one way or another) by the latter, more "ordinary" processes of belief formation that religious and non-religious individuals regularly rely on.

Regardless of whether others' religious commitments turn out to be correct, contemporary scholarship in philosophy and theology gives us good reason to think those commitments need not be "irrational" in the way that "faith"-based commitments are often assumed to be. To the contrary, there are many ways in which those commitments can be reasonably recognized to be consonant with basic norms of rationality. So, while it has become culturally commonplace to refer to individuals' religious commitments as "faith"-based, and to off-handedly define "faith" as in opposition to "reason," we need not give into this cultural construct or—as a result—treat leaders' appeals to others' religious reasons as morally problematic forms of manipulations of violations of respect for rational autonomy. Even secular leaders and followers working within secular institutional contexts should be able to understand appeals to religious reasons as expressions of respect for religiously-committed persons.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that there are good moral reasons for public leaders to appeal to religious considerations as bases for why religious citizens should comply with COVID policies: such appeals function both as intrinsic expressions of respect for those citizens and also hold the potential to produce extrinsically beneficial moral results by saving lives by producing wider compliance with COVID policies. I have not advocated that appeals to religious reasons should replace other moral and scientific arguments. However, insofar as these various sources of justification align with the same, morally valuable policy outcome, leaders can and should be ready to appeal to religious reasons as grounds on which religious followers might come to autonomously endorse COVID policies.

By requiring that leaders who appeal to religious reasons use a "convergence" approach—which requires appeal to a broad variety of moral, religious, and scientific reasons that speak to the perspectives of diverse followers—we can avoid some of the problems that normally draw suspicion about leaders' appeals to religious reasons. While the work of, for instance, Tourish and Tourish (2010) raises concerns about how the use of religion in secular contexts intersects with respect for non-religious followers' autonomy, the convergence approach requires that a policy can only be imposed on followers if there are adequate, diverse justifications that allow them all to autonomously consent to that policy. The convergence approach also helps limit some of the negative practical outcomes that observers' may worry will result from the use of religious reasons. Consider, for instance, Prasad's (2020) study of how Hindu nationalist leaders in India used religious premises as grounds for

discriminatory policies against Muslim minorities in their response to COVID-19. The convergence approach explains why such uses of religious reasons are morally off-limits: such discriminatory policies could not feasibly be justified to the relevant Muslim minorities in terms that they, too, could autonomously accept.

If the argument of this paper is correct, then—as Thompson (2004) and Hicks (2002) suggest—religious pluralism requires leaders not to take a "hands off" approach to religion, but rather to be more concerned with engaging with religious difference. Beyond the context of COVID-19 policies, another domain in which leaders would do well to attend more actively to followers' diverse religious values and practices is that of mental health programming. For instance, Muslim researchers working in refugee populations in Jordan have noted that non-profits and NGOs that send mental health professionals to work in refugee camps often promote yoga practices that are unfamiliar to the Muslim believers they work with, which results in resistance and low response rates to (well-intended) mental health programs (Dajani et al., forthcoming). Rather than urging believers to participate in mental health programs that employ unfamiliar practices, leaders in contexts like these could profitably examine how followers' existing religious commitments may already support practices that promote mental health: non-profits and NGOs working with Muslim-majority refugee populations might consider how, for example, the bodily movements and breathing exercises that Muslims engage in during daily prayers may reduce anxiety in similar ways as occur in yoga (Sayeed and Prakash, 2013). More broadly, employers and public servants who want to incentivize participation in mental programs should consider the wealth of evidence suggesting that engagement in religious communities and practices contributes to improved mental health outcomes (Levin, 2010; Rosmarin, 2021) and explore whether and how such forms of religious engagement might be included under the auspices of incentivized mental health practices. Finally, the argument of this paper suggests that when leaders implement policies that raise objections from religious followers—for instance, when such followers object to providing certain services for same-sex couples or to provisions for pro-choice health plans—leaders should consider examining how relevant believers' religious traditions may in fact contain internal theological resources for addressing those objections. The importance of promoting religious literacy among leaders that Burrell and Rahim (2018) argue for thus also becomes all the more pronounced.

In conclusion, the argument of this paper informs our understanding not only of what ethical conduct by leaders looks like in religiously pluralistic settings, but also of what genuine exercises of "leadership" entail in these contexts. As Burns (1978/2010) famously argues, exercises of leadership are distinct from mere instances of the wielding of power over others: while power can be exerted over objects and tools, Burns highlights that *leadership* can only be exercised over persons because they (unlike things) have independent volitions that a leader can engage as bases of influence and motivation. While Burns does not make any reference to the Kantian perspectives on autonomy that are so central to the work of contemporary political philosophers, there is a close connection between the two. Insofar as Kantian ethical theory demarcates the capacity for rational autonomy as the distinctive characteristic of persons, it would suggest that engaging with followers' *qua* persons in the way that is (according to Burns) characteristic of genuine exercises of leadership—rather than mere power wielding or manipulation—requires engagement with those followers' capacities for reason.

In this context, the kinds of considerations outlined by "exclusivist" theorists—and the assumptions of those who pit "faith" against "reason"—might lead some to question whether appeals to religion premises can ever figure into genuine exercises of leadership. However, as the work of convergence theorists suggests, leaders who appeal to such reasons need not thereby be "giving in" to "manipulative" uses of unreason or superstition. Instead, such appeals can manifest respect for

believers' free exercise of rationality and moral agency in an evidentially complex, pluralistic setting—and so be a critical part of respectful, genuine exercises of leadership in a religiously diverse global society.

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Notes

1. Emile Durkheim's work provides the basis for one of several basic theories of religion that are employed in Religious Studies departments. Unlike, for instance, psychological theories like that of Sigmund Freud's, which explicate religious commitment in terms of individual psychological "neuroses," sociological theories that are rooted in Durkheim's work stress the ways in which religious practice functions as a medium for building social solidarity within groups.
2. Given the urgency of achieving mass compliance with vaccination guidelines, leaders might begin by considering how religious principles and practices might give religious believers reasons to get the COVID-19 vaccine. They might, for instance, consider appealing to the various principles of non-injury and compassion that are cited in the Practical Argument for Religious Appeals section, or make reference to moral exemplars and parables that particular religious traditions offer. For instance, to Christians who are concerned about the risks of getting a vaccine, leaders might cite the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which the lead figure makes the risky choice of helping someone who has fallen into trouble by a dangerous roadside (Lucey, 2020). Leaders might also make reference to religious mandates that pertain more explicitly to desired health outcomes. For instance, when addressing Muslim followers, they might consider making reference to the Prophet Mohammad's injunction to believers that they should "make use of medical treatment" because "God has not made a disease without appointing a remedy for it" (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, 5678).
3. Historically, the Natural Law tradition—versions of which have developed in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity (Emon et al., 2014)—has taken a broadly rationalist approach to ethics. The "natural theology" tradition in Christianity, the Mu'tazilite tradition within Islam, and the darśana tradition in Hinduism also all take systematic, broadly rationalist approaches to theology more generally. Rooted as it is in colonialist power centers in Europe which were historically more familiar with Christian thought, contemporary philosophy of religion often privileges Christian perspectives—but some of its insights apply to explain why and how religious commitment more broadly might be regarded as rational. For an overview, see, for instance, Murray and Rae (2008); for work specific to Christianity, see, for instance, Swinburne (1994).

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