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Religion, Rationality, and Democracy: Is There Still a Place for Religion in the Public Sphere?

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The article intends to point out affinities in the positions of Jürgen Habermas and Terry Eagleton on the relationship between religion and politics in contemporary world, demonstrating that the recognition of the limitations of human rationality leads both of them to criticize the Enlightenment pretension to suppress any religious viewpoints in the discussion of moral and political issues. It is argued that Habermas and Eagleton share the view that, outside the domain of private beliefs, there would be a horizon in which the aspirations towards the world could converge and a dialogue could be possible not only among religious cultures, but also between these and the secular thought. Such a dialogue could be a contribution to creating a democratic public space consisting of religious and non-religious individuals, since both sides are committed to having a self-critical attitude, an openness to learn with the other and an inclination towards reciprocal understanding.

Keywords: post-secular society, democratic public sphere, communicative action, public reason, secular state

Introduction: Leo Strauss and the Theological-Political Problem

The aim of this article is to make two important contributions to the current debate on the possibility of peaceful coexistence of religious and non-religious individuals in the public sphere. To achieve this goal, it is relevant, and necessary, to recognize a 20th century author who perhaps has best explained the terms to find a solution to a question originated with modern political philosophy.

This author is the political philosopher Leo Strauss, and the question is about the inability of modern rationalism, absolutely represented by science, to deal with values-related issues. According to Strauss, science, by presenting results that philosophy proved itself unable to produce, has become the only intellectual pursuit which today can successfully claim to be the perfection of the human understanding. Thus, political philosophy became discredited, and, as a result, the possibility of rational justification for value judgments disappeared with the rise of the scientific knowledge, which is limited to factual investigations, abstaining itself from validating value judgments.

As a German Jew, Leo Strauss had suffered himself a tragic consequence of the course followed by modern rationalism in Nazi Germany, by facing persecutions from that regime. Most tragic, however, was the disarmament of political philosophy to the political confrontation with the totalitarianism. Within the context of a crisis of values, in 1921, under Cassirer's supervision, Leo Strauss presented a dissertation on the thought of

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Friedrich Heinrich Jacob, a critic of the Enlightenment rationalism, starting then a philosophical battle for bringing theology to the heart of political philosophy.

In that enterprise, Strauss (1993) analyzed the process that led to the removal of what he called "the theological-political problem" from modern political philosophy. This process, which dates back to Machiavelli in modernity, finds its best expression in the thought of Hobbes, who, based on the re-evaluation of classical mathematics and physics, uses them as instruments for the emancipation of politics in the face of religion. Thereafter, political philosophy develops up to the culmination of the Enlightenment, with its misguided belief that religion was no longer a relevant political issue.

In his efforts, Strauss (1989) considered Plato's and Aristotle's political thought as well. The mediation between modern and classical political philosophy was possible by his discovery of the political thought of medieval Arab authors like Alfarrabi and Maimonides, who, from the perspective of the revealed truth, opened a dialogue with the classical thought. According to Leo Strauss, an important point in this dialogue was the way those authors followed Plato in their understanding of the divine law, the providence and the prophets as objects of politics (Meyer, 2006). By reading those authors, Leo Strauss could get a wider perspective on the role of natural law in the formulation of both a political theory and a philosophical-political judgment on the politics shaped to the government of people in the *polis*. Such a politics is the one in which the ruler or the philosopher-king, without neglecting the moral priority of natural law, in its best prescriptive form of government, is able to communicate with the prejudices of the *polis*, and therefore obtain consent.

In his understanding of classical natural law, Leo Strauss isolates it as a non-variable political element in the variability in customs and constitutions. Being capable of formulating moral or ethical judgments, classical political philosophy establishes itself as a kind of repository of possible answers for eternal questions such as "What is the right way of living?", "What is fair?". Accordingly, the possible politics will not become a dogma through a petrified tradition: On the contrary, it is always reviving through the questioning about what life is desired to live.

This desire for questioning about the right way of living has made philosophy find its kinship with religion. Both classical natural law and the revealed truth are similar as a place to where the most important issues of people are addressed. On the other hand, if, in a sense, natural law and theology agree, they differ on their prescriptive ways to discover the truth. According to Leo Strauss, this point defines the theological-political problem: While theology prescribes a way of life based on obedience to faith or to the revealed law, philosophy advocates the freedom in asking and learning. From a philosophical standpoint, happiness consists of free research and understanding, while the Bible defends the view that happiness consists of obedience to God. Since then, philosophy has been performing the task of denying the possibility of a revealed truth.

This enterprise was undertaken by Benedictus Spinoza (2007) in his *Theological-Political Treatise*, first published in 1670. However, according to Strauss, Spinoza would have failed because his philosophical system was unable to prove the impossibility of Revelation. This happened because Spinoza excluded the notion of miracle and the idea of inscrutability of God from his philosophical system. According to Strauss, historical criticism about Revelation was based on the dogmatic exclusion of the possibility of miracles and verbal inspiration.

The difficulty of denying Revelation by philosophy obliges the latter to pursue this objective and, at the same time, imposes that it must admit the possibility of Revelation. Philosophy must remain consistent with its

principle that no knowledge can be based on a premise not proved. In this context, refusing the possibility of miracles and divinely inspired prophecy would be the same as admitting an unproven certainty, given that the attempt to refute Revelation has not been fully accomplished.

Based on the analysis of Strauss on the theological-political problem, we conclude that, since philosophy cannot demonstrate the impossibility of a revealed truth, the answer to the question of whether one should follow the path of rational inquiry or obedience to Divine Will lies in the coexistence of these two ways of life in the same public space, which should be sanctioned by reason.

Habermas and the Concept of "Post-Secular Society"

In our preliminary remarks, we have stressed the importance of the debate on the relationship between religion and politics. Our intention in examining the reflections of Leo Strauss was to present one of the ways in which the political thought of the first half of the 20th century became aware of such relationship and sought to extract their ultimate consequences from them. The central hypothesis of this article recalls Leo Strauss' thesis that the relationship between religion and politics is at the heart of Western political thought.

We will now present some of the ways by which the political debate has been addressing the relationship between religion and politics these days. We want to point out the current recognition of the limits and contradictions of the secular rationality itself, which raises questions about the typically modern claim to overcome any and all religious points of view in explaining the social world and in proposing ideals to be achieved. The exhaustion of the Enlightenment project seems to put the relationship between secular thought and religious traditions on a new basis.

In view of this, unlike authors as Jürgen Habermas and Terry Eagleton agree on establishing that philosophical reason needs to dialogue about moral and political issues with perspectives based on faith (and no longer on the Christian faith alone). By seeking support from the ideas of these authors, this article intends to show that such a dialogue would make a positive contribution to the construction of a truly democratic public space consisting of religious and non-religious individuals, since both sides were committed to maintaining an essentially self-critical posture, an openness to consider the point of view of the other and an authentic inclination towards reciprocal understanding and learning.

Let us take as a starting point the fruitful lecture given by Habermas during his meeting with the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), held in Munich on the 19th of January of 2004, at a conference organized by the Catholic Academy of Bavaria. That event had wide repercussion for having facilitated the dialogue between representatives of two different intellectual worlds, who, however, are aware of the need for opening a dialogue in order to expand the horizon of ideas and values capable of establishing a common ground on which the irreducible human diversity could flourish instead of leading to the destruction of people.

In his lecture, Habermas, whose great intellectual endeavour has been to demonstrate that reason can establish forms of communicability among individuals and groups which enable them to guide their reciprocal actions towards the creation of a global democratic society, proposes that cultural and social secularization be understood as a dual learning process requiring both the Enlightenment traditions and the religious doctrines to reflect on their respective limits. By analyzing the consequences of the encounter between Greek philosophy and Christianity in the Hellenistic Age, Habermas (2007) recognizes a kind of mutual permeation through which Christianity found rational instruments for the construction of its dogmatic theology, and philosophy, in

turn, appropriated genuinely Christian contents, however, adapting them for its argumentation patterns. According to Habermas, an example of this appropriation is the transposition of the Christian idea of the universal affiliation of human beings to a single Creator for the concept of the equal human dignity, a fundamental assumption of modern nature law doctrine. The contents of originally religious concepts can push the boundaries of believers' communities and may contribute to a necessary ethical self-analysis of humanity.

The great contribution of Habermas to the debate on the relationship between religion and politics in constitutional states is summarised in the concept of "post-secular society", which should be understood as a normative rather than a descriptive concept (Habermas, 2010). With this concept, the German philosopher intends to resolve the problem of participation of religion in the public sphere in a political context marked by, on the one hand, the opposition to the supremacy of the Enlightenment reason in that sphere, and, on the other hand, the permanence of the importance of religious beliefs for a considerable number of secular states' citizens. According to Habermas, a truly secular and democratic constitutional state could not exclude a certain source of values from public discussion, but it would be its own interest to allow their moderate expression, i.e., through socially agreed and accepted means. This happens because democratically constituted legal orders permanently require motivational impulses which supply the normative conscience and solidarity among citizens.

Thus, the expression "post-secular" does not mean that current societies have ceased or should cease to be secular. It does mean a new form of relationship between religion and the public sphere that is imposed on them. In this new relationship, it is not deemed necessary or appropriate that moral viewpoints based on religious beliefs, in principle, are prevented from being defended in political discussion with a view to their incorporation into the legal order of society. On the contrary, the active role of religious conceptions of the world is recognized as a source of values that add complexity to the normative conscience of plural societies, which reflects a new vision of political relations between believer and non believer citizens. This vision establishes that such relations must lead to a process of dual and complementary learning, where both sides will be able to take seriously in public, for cognitive reasons, their respective contributions to controversial topics.

In a post-secular society, it is necessary to accept limits. This is true for both secular citizens (who cannot prevent religious citizens, based on their beliefs, from participate in public debates) and religious citizens (who need to make their convictions reflective in order to have them assumed in the public space, i.e., need to avoid to close their mind to the point of view of those who do not share the same beliefs). For Habermas, these attitudes constitute a genuine liberal political culture. Here, religious beliefs have a status in the democratic process since their proponents strive to translate them into a secular and publicly accessible language. On the other hand, the secular mindset cannot think that all forms of belief are irrational, excluding them from the process just because they are beliefs.

Terry Eagleton and the New Debate on God

"Who would expect that theology would once again hold its head up high in the technocratic twenty-first century, almost as surprisingly as a rebirth en masse of Zoroastrianism, or Neoplatonism?" This question, raised by Terry Eagleton in one of his lectures delivered in April of 2008, at Yale University, properly expresses the current perception of the need of resumption of a dialogue between theology and philosophy as a result of the new settings of a relationship that is not new at all. In fact, it has been present throughout the history of the West, known as the relationship between religion and politics. Eagleton set an ironic and even

sarcastic tone in his lectures on religion from the standpoint of science and philosophy, which were targeted at the works of Christopher Hitchens (2007) and Richard Dawkins (2008), over which Eagleton (2009) caused a fierce controversy.

This debate is not just the current expression of a dispute that, since the dawn of the modern era, has been fought between religion and science (which sometimes takes the form of a dispute between faith and atheism), but it is also the opportunity for Eagleton, Marxist-oriented philosopher and literary critic, to encourage a serious and unbiased reflection about the possible political development of that thought which was part of his family background: the Christian thought. According to Eagleton, it is necessary firstly to overcome the pessimistic view that most atheists and agnostics hold about Christianity, and, secondly, it is necessary to explore the revolutionary potential of Christian Gospel. However, this does not mean, in any way, that the author fails to emphasize the extent to which historical Christianity itself moved away from that potential in a movement that contributed to the erosion of the political content of its original message with an increasing adaptation to the world.

However, on strongly reacting to the theories through which Dawkins and Hitchens intend to demonstrate the decisive victory of science over religion as well as the uselessness and harmfulness of the persistence of the idea of God, Eagleton, in fact, wants to provide a radical critique of current liberal societies, emphasizing the political importance of religion. Eagleton analyzes the problem of the secularization of modern liberal societies in terms of its political implications. In political terms, these societies pay a heavy price for their belief in the "death of God". This price might be the erosion of any metaphysical foundation (whether transcendent or transcendental, whether outside or inside reason), including the metaphysical values on which political authority partly depends.

Having, due to its own essence, an ambiguous relationship with the dimension of belief, liberal pluralism shows a certain indifference to belief contents in the name of the principles of freedom and tolerance, but, at the same time, tries to place all belief within certain limits in order to safeguard such principles. This led to a political culture that has always expressed a distrust in the motivational potential of beliefs while trying to absolutise secular reason as an instrument for the resolution of human conflicts in the public sphere, i.e., a political culture very effective at establishing procedures to be followed in the arena of political struggle, but unable to cope with an incontrovertible fact that feeds this struggle, namely the attachment of people to worldviews and ideals founded on beliefs.

Approaching Habermas' emphasis on the need for "translation" of the beliefs language into a language accessible to non-believers as well, Eagleton argues that beliefs need not be respected just because they are beliefs. Likewise, in his opinion, beliefs should not be abandoned just because they are beliefs. What must be avoided is such an exacerbation of belief that just prevents it from holding a political dialogue, which inevitably opens the door to intentions in replacing politics with religion. These intentions are present in every kind of religious fundamentalism, a phenomenon that, unlike what is generally believed, is anti-political rather than political.

In agreement with Leo Strauss' conception of the type of problem from which the questions of political philosophy emerge, as well as with Habermas' reflection about the relationship between faith and reason, Eagleton refuses the caricatured presentation of the history of modern political philosophy as based on the complete and definitive separation between the domains of religion and politics, and on the consolidation of an

exclusively secular thought to supplant all religious worldviews in the task of thinking about political life. Political philosophy has always sought to conceive projects on what is good for people in their inevitable social and political coexistence. However, on performing this task, political philosophy encounters (and will always do) projects coming out of human desires for eternal happiness, justice, and perfection. These projects are often established on transcendent bases adhered to by belief, having great motivational strength.

In view of this fact, Eagleton reminds us that philosophical thought should not simply close its eyes to such projects, not because there could be some cognitive potential in them, but rather because one can discern in them an important potential contribution to the always inevitable discussion on moral and political issues. However, for this to occur, it is necessary that faith and reason should be seen as discourse bases capable of cooperating in the construction of an authentic public sphere.

Conclusion: The Importance of Political Theology Nowadays

There is no indication that the aforementioned desires will someday disappear, nor that religion will cease to be a means through which such desires are formulated and pursued. On the contrary, nowadays we are witnessing a kind of religious revival even in secular and liberal societies. Definitely, this phenomenon has a political dimension which should not be neglected. In this context, it is imperative that we do not renounce the dialogue with different religious traditions, but that their own values and perspectives can acquire the status of arguments capable of being discussed in a secular and democratic public sphere.

To achieve this goal, the secular rationality cannot consider itself as an end in itself, but should recognize what may feed on the contents from different sources of value and motivation. Obviously, this does not mean that religion should replace politics, but that it seems to be necessary to consider the importance of political theology again. By this expression, we certainly do not want to designate a return to the role that theology has attributed to itself at the time of Christianity. Nowadays, political theology should mean the enterprise that religions must undertake as a condition to participate in a rational dialogue through which the great current moral issues are debated. And this dialogue can take place only within the democratic political arena.

Only two alternatives appear to exist for dealing with these major issues: the understanding that different cultures (and, within them, religious traditions) are worlds that have their own logic and among which there is no possibility of communication or understanding of common projects, or the view that, beyond the realm of private beliefs, there would be a horizon where aspirations towards the world could converge, and, in the name of these aspirations, a dialogue would be possible not only among cultures but also between them and the rational thought. The authors whose positions we have attempted to outline in this article seem to bet on the latter. Agreeing with them, we also believe that this way of facing the challenges currently imposed to the world gives religion an important place and an essential task to perform.

Moreover, we believe that, by this way, political philosophy would also benefit. Indeed, in the 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville realized the need to create a true science of democracy, presenting it as a new political science for an entirely new world (Tocqueville, 2000). Similarly, in the 21st century, we notice the need to build a new science of politics again. Nowadays, this science is requested for a world where democracy is no longer a recent phenomenon, but still needs to learn how to create forms of political relations improvement in an increasingly complex context. We will only achieve such a science if we do not get lost in pragmatic issues related to exclusively economic interests. In other words, if our rationality does not become myopic to the beliefs, values, and wordviews that effectively move people today.

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