Religious truth claims and liberal democracy

by

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Opening Contribution to the Panel Discussion
“Religious Truth Claims and Liberal Democracy: Contribution or Contest?”
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I was told not to strive for political correctness. So, to be correct, I won’t do it. But I beg a liberal attitude towards what I am going to say – and towards my deficient English.

When asking for a liberal attitude, I wonder what the attribute ‘liberal’ might mean. This is not unimportant for our endeavor since the titular confrontation between ‘liberal democracy’ and ‘religious truth claims’ insinuates some tension between the two concepts.

A first and quite obvious reaction to this juxtaposition – especially a reaction of a secularized European – might be this one: “Religious truth claims are ‘absolutist’ or ‘fundamentalist’ and destroy the freedom that is being provided by liberal democracy.”

But my reaction is different. While there is much more to say, let me briefly concentrate on five considerations.

First, I would like to point out a risk associated with both liberalism (in a broad sense of the term) and religion. Both can take fundamentalist shape. That is – according to my definition of fundamentalism –, its propagators regard their programs as an absolute truth and try to impose their ideas of social organization on as many others as possible. For religious fundamentalism in this sense, Ground Zero is a shocking example. On the other hand, as an example for ‘liberalist’ fundamentalism you might want to recall the CIA involvement in bombing the Chilean presidential palace and installing a terror regime on September 11, 1973. Nevertheless, in my understanding the problem cannot be discussed satisfactorily on the level of a contest between different systems of social or religious organization. Instead, it boils down to a very basic anthropological and humanist issue: the relation of reason and bodily existence.

So, second, let’s examine the anthropological question in relation to liberalism. In this tradition – from Rawls, passing Habermas, Horkheimer and others down to Kant – we can perceive that freedom eventually is based on reason as the condition of its possibility. Thus, ideally, liberal communities consist of individuals endowed with reason, situated in ‘non-coercive discourses’. But what are the conditions of the possibility of reason? Evidently, the most basic condition is corporal, bodily, sensorial life. With this reference, we can go beyond traditional liberalism to human relations in general.

Third, bodily existence, thus, is the criterion by which any truth claim in relation to social or religious practice has to be measured. Since bodily existence is the condition of the possibility of reason, it is far more elementary than reason and, therefore, a more universal criterion of truth. In consequence any political or religious program should be measured by the touchstone of how it serves the existence of each and every human being – may these be inside or outside the domain of a given system of social organization. Furthermore, bodily existence is not simply given, but it depends itself on conditions of its possibility, such as food, shelter, clothes, human care and acceptance a.s.f.... as for example Martha Nussbaum would put it. Now, this is a humanist program that even religious actors could agree upon – of course, depending on their view of what religious truth claims are about.

Fourth, ‘liberal’ religious people might easily agree while others might not. But on a deep level, it is not an issue of liberalism versus conservatism or the like. It is an issue between
faith and reason – or, even deeper: the issue is about the very image of God. So, for example, followers of an Abrahamic religion could step on the humanist argument, saying that God himself, the creator, is the condition of the possibility of bodily existence. And that therefore a ‘godly’ – yes, there are many people using this expression! – ...a ‘godly’ regime of human life and social organization has more legitimacy than the humanist care for each and every human being.

Here, we are arriving at the central question: What is the theological validity of the ‘godly’ argument? In a few words: In order to be positively sure about the objective and universal will of God himself, it is necessary to presuppose that man can dispose of a clear copy of God’s reasoning. This ‘realist’ presupposition has been questioned already by medieval nominalists. Nevertheless it has infected certain currents of Christian, Muslim and Jewish theology alike. A strong and well known counter argument against ‘theological realism’ – especially the one of 19th century US-Evangelical or Scottish Common Sense Realism – is that the followers of these currents do not take into consideration that even sacred scriptures have to be interpreted, and that humans – the interpreters – are finite, that rationality is oriented by their conditions of living... a.s.f. However, in my opinion, there is an even stronger theological caveat: It indicates that everybody who claims to know the will of God objectively and binding for everybody else claims the own reason or mind to be equal to the reason or mind of God himself. That is, these persons blur the distinction between God, the creator, and man, the creature. They do not let God be God and, concomitantly, they rescind the ontological foundation of their own truth claim, thus rendering their claim illegitimate.

So fifth and finally, we have to ask what legitimate religious truth claims are about. Religious convictions are based on faith. According to the Apostle Paul, Martin Luther and some others, religious persons set all their hope, confidence and practice on the conviction that God loves them. Of course, truth claims may originate from this faith, even about issues of social organization such as liberal democracy versus Christian, Muslim or Jewish communitarianism. Such believers can strongly stand for their religious convictions, may give loud testimony and even pay with martyrdom. But they know about their own argument’s finiteness and relativity, because they know that only God himself is absolute. In spite of strong convictions, these persons will always accept other people – regardless their faith and opinions – as fellow creatures, fellow humans and fellow citizens. They would engage in making society according to the conviction that nothing on earth is absolute, since only God is absolute and wants humans to be humans and to be humane.

Such believers would warn others –religious people and secularists alike – not to give in to the old temptation of reason as narrated in Genesis 3:5: to eat from the tree of knowledge so that “your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil”. That is, they would warn not to give in the rationalist temptation to become absolute, like God, by virtue of one’s own truth claims – because this precisely is the quintessence of sin.

In consequence, the liberal believers’ religious claim in relation to ‘liberal democracy’ would be foremost – I suppose – that liberal democracy should abstain from setting itself absolute.

Thank you very much. Heinrich Wilhelm Schäfer, Oct. 2010