

John Rawls's Genealogy of Liberalism
Ronald Beiner

Political Liberalism has generated an astonishing set of debates within contemporary liberalism.¹ This is perfectly understandable, for the post-Rawlsian debates raise issues of profound significance for contemporary society (i.e., the current situation of radical ethnic, cultural, and religious pluralism); and I don't doubt that the questions raised by Rawls about liberal citizenship and how it ought to accommodate illiberal forms of religion are entirely worthy of the attention they have received from political philosophers. But I think there's one striking text in PL that has perhaps received less attention in the Rawls literature than it merits. I'm referring to Rawls's effort to define liberalism, notably in the Introduction to PL,² in relation to the 16th-17th-century Wars of Religion. Of course, it is hardly a novel idea to trace liberalism back to this historical context; on the contrary, it is virtually a cliché to say that liberalism arose out of the Wars of Religion (which of course doesn't mean that it isn't true to say this). So it is interesting that Rawls chooses to introduce his crowning articulation of his own version of liberalism with a story of this kind. More to the point, it is especially interesting exactly how Rawls crafts this story – so to speak, how he chooses to flesh out (however compactly or telegraphically) this old cliché/truism. It may even pay dividends for our understanding of the other debates that PL has aroused.

Are the Wars of Religion still relevant to contemporary liberals? What I propose to do in this discussion of Rawls is to look at his highly compressed account of the genesis of liberalism in the Introduction of PL, and to explore how this genealogical narrative possibly shapes the larger theoretical agenda in late Rawls – which turns out to be highly problematical (for reasons I'll try to explain). Rawls's genealogy of liberalism in the Introduction to PL is amazingly concentrated, but I think it is of decisive importance for grasping both the nature of the philosophical structure laid out in PL and, so to speak, its animating principle.

Before turning to Rawls's genealogy, let us briefly sketch Rawls's view that founding the liberal state on “comprehensive doctrines” (including liberal comprehensive doctrines) is not just dispensable but illegitimate – which is unquestionably the core idea of PL. In an important sense, Rawls, in PL, sets himself apart from the history of liberalism, whereas in A Theory of Justice he had aligned himself with the history of

¹ John Rawls, Political Liberalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) = PL.

² PL, pp. xxiii-xxx. There are also brief discussions in PL, pp. 148-149, 159, and 303-304, as well as the important statement on p. 154: “Were justice as fairness to make an overlapping consensus possible it would complete and extend the movement of thought that began three centuries ago with the gradual acceptance of the principle of toleration and led to the nonconfessional state and equal liberty of conscience” (my italics). See also the posthumously-published Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 11, where Rawls lists the response to the Reformation and the Wars of Religion it set off as constituting the first of “three main historical origins” of modern liberalism, the other two being constitutional government and universal suffrage.

liberalism (or at least aligned himself with one version of liberalism engendered in that history). To be a liberal, Rawls now insists, it is not necessary to formulate some grand conception of what it is to be human – or what purposes are distinctively human purposes – according to which being a liberal serves the human vocation. Both Kant and J.S. Mill in their different ways embraced this view. This defines their shared commitment to “liberalism as a comprehensive doctrine” – hence Rawls’s famous distinction between “comprehensive” versions of liberalism and (merely) “political” versions of liberalism. On Rawls’s (PL-formulated) view, not only is it not necessary to have a grand view of this kind; one can in fact be a better liberal by not asserting such a view – because one can display respect for a wider array of fellow-citizens.

Yet there’s a deep puzzle about why Rawls is so averse to justifying liberalism by appeal to comprehensive doctrines. His official line is that if the state privileges, for instance, liberal autonomy as a comprehensive view of life, the state thereby treats unfairly those who don’t share this particular view of life. Let’s call this “grand liberalism.” What Rawls in effect presents as the implicit injustice of requiring grand liberalism for all members of the liberal state prompts Rawls to opt instead for what we can call, by contrast, “modest liberalism.” Modest liberalism limits itself to minimum conditions of shared citizenship: a liberalism of (mere) citizenship rather than a liberalism of existential worldviews.

But here is where the puzzle kicks in. Rawls’s later philosophy of liberalism perhaps doesn’t assert individual autonomy as a civically-privileged view of life. It does, however, privilege the view that citizenship is important – sufficiently important that religious commitments should not trump a commitment to ecumenical citizenship. In what sense does this privileging of citizenship not entail a view of life?³ In what sense is a view of life not entailed in the notion that shared multi-denominational co-existence should be normatively affirmed and theocracy (or theocratic ambitions) should be normatively repudiated? Indeed, in what sense is there not a (liberal) view of life expressed in the ideal of mutual respect between citizens qua citizens? It starts to look as if, in Rawls’s modest liberalism, although grand liberalism has been barred from the front door, key aspects of grand liberalism have been slipped in the back door.⁴

³ Just to spell it out: my suggestion is that “civicism” rather than individual autonomy is the “comprehensive doctrine” to which Rawls should commit himself in order to render his liberalism fully coherent. However, it goes without saying that recasting Rawls’s liberalism in this way entails a radical attenuation of the firm distinction between civic republicanism and civic humanism that Rawls develops in PL, pp. 205-206.

A further point: Rawls’s standard line is that carrying one’s comprehensive views into the public realm rather than leaving them at the doorstep undermines civic unity. But if the comprehensive view that one is carrying into the public realm is a commitment to shared civic life, then it makes no sense to say that this comprehensive doctrine is a solvent of civic unity.

⁴ At the end of Rawls’s genealogy (PL, p. xxx), he writes: “The general problems of moral philosophy are not the concern of political liberalism, except insofar as they affect how the background culture and its comprehensive doctrines tend to support a constitutional regime” (my italics). This seems precisely an invitation to sweep “grand liberalism” in through the back door.

I am already starting to get more drawn into the standard debates about Rawls's formulation of political liberalism than I want to be⁵ (though I'll come back to some of these challenges later in this essay), so let me hasten to discussion of the genealogy. The question raised by the genealogy is whether, on Rawls's view, liberalism is fundamentally an a-historical system of ideas – a system of ideas that's morally and intellectually compelling because it can be laid out in a way that exhibits its philosophical coherence (which is what's suggested by Rawls's two main works of political philosophy), or whether the compellingness of liberalism follows from our grasp of a particular set of historical experiences; and if the latter, how religion figures in this history. The place where Rawls most directly addresses this question is the Introduction to PL, and the answer he gives there is far more oriented towards history (verging on a philosophy of history, one might say) than his main works of political philosophy would lead one to expect.⁶ In what follows, I'm especially interested in why Rawls feels impelled to insert a potted history of the genesis of liberalism, and in how this genealogical story possibly skews core conceptions in Rawls's fully-developed account of his liberalism.

Rawls introduces the genealogy by claiming that his conception of political liberalism is not a philosophical invention but rather the theoretical expression of the specificity of modern democratic political culture as shaped by the unfolding of a particular history – a history that opens up a decisive chasm between ancients and moderns. Rawls emphasizes that his own version of the narrative has only the status of a “conjecture” (PL, p. xxiii), but he clearly believes that some such account shapes the agenda of modern politics in a crucial way. What is Rawls's genealogical story? The story begins with the ancient Greeks. He claims that the Greeks offered the true model of a “civic religion” – a religion centred on integration into the basic practices of the society and performance of central civic duties rather than doctrinal commitment or adherence to the precepts of a sacred text. It didn't dispense salvation presided over by a class of priests, but told citizens how to be citizens.⁷ Insofar as the world of the Greeks expressed a conception of the highest good identified with “success and honor, power and wealth,

⁵ Patrick Neal's chapter in this volume offers a very helpful summing-up of these “standard debates” insofar as they bear on religion. Neal makes a persuasive case that at the end of the day, Rawls's civic exclusion of religionists is nowhere near robust enough to have justified the kind of fuss it provoked among his critics. But then one can ask: if Rawls is willing in practice to allow considerable latitude for the expression of religious comprehensive doctrines in political debate, what was the point of making such a big issue of the need to subordinate comprehensive doctrines to public reason?

⁶ Putting the point in this way suggests that the Introduction to PL is external to PL rather than a stage-setting aspect of the argument of PL. I realize that this is a bit paradoxical, but I think the point I'm making is nonetheless clear enough.

⁷ For some sharp criticisms of Rawls's account of Greek religion, see Daniel A. Dombrowski, Rawls and Religion: The Case for Political Liberalism (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 3-4. The thesis of Dombrowski's book is that the engagement with religion is not unique to PL, but rather, extends through the entirety of Rawls's oeuvre, to an extent insufficiently appreciated in the Rawls literature.

social standing and prestige” (PL, p. xxiv), Homeric religion didn’t challenge the supremacy of these ideals but instead reinforced them: the Homeric gods basically replicated this conception of the highest good for human beings, albeit embodied in immortal rather than mortal beings. So the challenge to this vision of life (expressing the ethic of an ancient warrior class) came not from religion but from Socratic and post-Socratic moral philosophy (PL, pp. xxiii-xxiv). Rawls conceives the Socratic tradition not as challenging the reigning civic religion but simply addressing a different set of questions than the civic religion sought to address, and appealing more directly to reason in attempting to address that different set of questions.⁸

Rawls then very quickly leaps ahead to modernity, focusing on three key developments: the Reformation; the consolidation of a centralized state; and the emergence of modern science. Of these three key developments, the one that clearly interests Rawls the most is the Reformation, both with respect to how it transformed medieval Christianity and with respect to how it served as the ultimate source of the astounding religious, cultural, and social pluralism in the post-18th century world. What is laid out in Rawls’s genealogy is therefore not a two-stage history (ancients and moderns) but really a three-stage history (civic religion, pre-Reformation Christianity, and the post-Reformation situation, including liberalism as a response to the warfare between stage 2 and stage 3). How does stage 2 relate to stage 1? Rawls articulates a number of important differences: medieval Christianity is authoritarian in a way that Greek civic religion wasn’t; it offers a “religion of salvation,” promising eternal life for those who are saved; it is a doctrinal religion, requiring embrace of a specific compulsory creed; it is, as Hobbes and Rousseau highlighted, “a religion of priests”; and it is, finally and crucially, an imperialist religion making universal claims that far exceed those asserted by the civic religion of particular ancient city-states (PL, p. xxv). These various aspects of medieval Christianity form an integrated package, and although Rawls doesn’t cite Rousseau, all of these features of Christianity figure prominently in Rousseau’s analysis in his civil religion chapter. But what crucially defines the Reformation’s relationship to this hegemonic religion is that it emphatically didn’t dissolve these authoritarian, illiberal, and imperialist features of its civilizational predecessor. On the contrary, Reformation religion spawned a kind of replicant twin of medieval Christianity: equally dogmatic, equally intolerant (PL, p. xxv).⁹ With these two salvationist, doctrinal, and imperialist

⁸ The explicit challenges to Homer posed by Plato in The Republic force one to ask whether there wasn’t more direct rivalry between the Homeric and Socratic traditions than Rawls suggests.

⁹ For another important discussion of the theme of how medieval Catholicism and Reformation Protestantism mirror each other with respect to religious intolerance, see Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 215-216. See also Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” in Collected Papers, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 603, n. 75: “A persecuting zeal has been the great curse of the Christian religion. It was shared by Luther and Calvin and the Protestant Reformers, and it was not radically changed in the Catholic Church until Vatican II.”

religions confronting each other, it is no surprise that the result was centuries of horrific religious warfare.¹⁰

The Reformation didn't just confront a dogmatic and intolerant authoritarian church with a set of dogmatic and intolerant sects; it also gave rise to a tremendous pluralism of worldviews that eventually set the stage for political liberalism as the object of an overlapping consensus among those worldviews that met the standard of reasonableness. Although it was far from what was intended by Luther and Calvin (who remained entirely oriented towards the notion of a unique and binding theological truth), the ultimate consequence of the Reformation was the possibility of pluralism – a pluralism only possible on the basis of “the division of Christendom” – which in turn allowed for religious liberty.¹¹ Considering the wars that were its immediate result, it's easy to see the fracturing of Christendom as an unmitigated “disaster”; but this is trumped by its long-term meaning: reasonable pluralism founded on the natural “exercise of reason under the conditions of freedom” (PL, p. xxvi). Political liberalism “assumes the fact of reasonable pluralism as a pluralism of comprehensive doctrines, including both religious and nonreligious doctrines” (*ibid.*), and as such, it has the Reformation to thank for its own possibility. Rawls concedes that prior to the historical experience of a functioning pluralist society, it wasn't unreasonable or unnatural to assume “that social unity and concord requires agreement on a general and comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine” (PL, p. xxvii) – that is, some kind of theocracy, or at least civil religion. It was only “the successful and peaceful practice of toleration in societies with liberal institutions” that proved that stability needn't be founded on intolerance (*ibid.*). Even if religion encourages us to believe in the damnation of those who are not co-religionists, the practice of ecumenical cooperation “with trust and confidence, long and fruitfully ... in maintaining a just society” (*ibid.*) persuades us otherwise. Even though the Reformers still believed that stability requires theocracy, the long historical experience of trying to cope with the pluralism generated by the Reformation has taught liberal societies that true stability in a radically pluralistic situation requires the opposite (toleration and respect for freedom of conscience).

Solution of the problem consists in separating political justice from “the highest good” (PL, p. xxvii).¹² The ancients didn't have to wrestle with this problem of political

¹⁰ PL, pp. xxvii-xxviii: “the clash between salvationist, credal, and expansionist religions ... introduces into people's conceptions of their good a transcendent element not admitting of compromise.... Political liberalism starts by taking to heart the absolute depth of that irreconcilable latent conflict.” That is, if one had been insistent on adjudicating this war of worldviews on the plane of conceptions of the good, the Wars of Religion would have lasted forever. Liberal societies succeeded in extricating themselves from this mess by starting to articulate an independent conception of political justice (or civic justice) that abstracted from these warring conceptions of the good.

¹¹ Rawls (PL, p. xxvi) aptly cites Hegel's view that the disuniting of the church was a necessary condition for the state “reach[ing] its appointed end as a self-consciously rational and ethical organization”: Hegel's Philosophy of Right, trans. T.M. Knox (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 174.

¹² There are echoes of Hobbes in this formulation. I'll come back to this towards the end of this essay.

justice because “the clash between salvationist, creedal, and expansionist religions” (ibid.) is something they never experienced. Nor was it experienced within medieval Christianity since the Church then held a theological monopoly. In this sense, the Reformation introduced something utterly unique: the problem of joining in a mode of civic cooperation those who don’t share a comprehensive doctrine. Shared citizenship among those “divided by profound doctrinal conflict” (ibid.) seems impossible until one hits on the idea of separating justice and “the good.” According to Rawls, “the good” was defined for moderns by their religion (ibid.), and therefore modern liberalism’s solution to the problem posed by the Reformation only became possible when one succeeded in placing questions of the good (comprehensive doctrines) outside the sphere of justice. That is precisely the historical shift that political liberalism claims to conceptualize at the level of theory.

In the last section of the genealogy (PL, pp. xxviii-xxix), Rawls gives a brief but incisive account of the intellectual movement (spearheaded by the heroic intellectual labours of Hume and Kant) whereby “moral knowledge” was de-theologized and de-clericalized. Apprehensions of moral order came to be seen as coming from within rather than from an external source, and as universally accessible rather than confined to a clerical elite. Moreover, the great thinkers of the Enlightenment brought about a moral revolution in suggesting that it was possible for human beings to do what is morally right without being prompted to do so by divine sanctions. So does Rawls align himself with this great liberalizing movement in moral philosophy? No, because while these thinkers would have been right had they taken these positions as something required by “a political conception of justice for a constitutional democratic regime” (PL, p. xxix), they in fact delivered an over-reaching version of liberalism by seeking “to establish a basis of moral knowledge independent of ecclesiastical authority and available to the ordinary reasonable and conscientious person” (PL, p. xxviii; my italics) – that is, the establishment of a new set of moral truths that would answer on the plane of philosophical analysis the questions that the warring salvationist doctrines were also presuming to answer. As long as these questions are to be settled in the register of ultimate truth, we are still in principle stuck in the 16th-century sinkhole we are trying to escape. By contrast, political liberalism “maintain[s] impartiality between comprehensive doctrines” (PL, p. xxx) by not presuming to judge between, say, the view that moral order is immanent in human nature and the view that it is the product of divine command.¹³

What the genealogy traces (albeit with amazing concision) is the historical process whereby comprehensive doctrines that insist on a political monopoly and reject all compromise turn into reasonable comprehensive doctrines. What is a reasonable comprehensive doctrine? A reasonable comprehensive doctrine is one that doesn’t assert truth (Rawls would be naturally inclined to say: its truth) sufficiently forcefully as to

¹³ This is the Rawlsian compromise: religions that refuse to join the overlapping consensus will be politically de-legitimized, whereas those that do join it will be spared any moral or philosophical challenges. One set of critics will attack the first side of this compromise; another set of critics will attack the other side of it. The compromise will satisfy neither those most committed to religion nor those most hostile to it.

exclude shared citizenship with other comprehensive doctrines.¹⁴ This harks back to the conclusion of Rousseau's civil religion chapter: in Rousseau's view, if we think of those committed to other doctrines of salvation as slated for damnation, we obviously cannot share citizenship with them.¹⁵ The purpose of Rawls's genealogy is to lay out a history of pre-liberal religions (including Catholic Christianity and Protestant Christianity) that are not reasonable in this sense. In order to be reasonable (i.e., to become ecumenical-citizenship-enabling), these religions must undergo a process of liberalization. The Wars of Religion were of course wonderfully educational with respect to the need for this liberalization vis-à-vis other religions in equal need of the same kind of liberalization. Political liberalism only becomes possible once this process of liberalization (this genealogy) has already unfolded itself. It would therefore be reasonable to speak of Rawls's political liberalism as an "Owl of Minerva" doctrine – it can only be articulated philosophically when the work of liberalization has already been done via a particular historical process. What the genealogy discloses is that Rawls's liberalism is a mode of "Hegelian" liberalism insofar as it is not intellectually free-standing (i.e., a-historical) but rather, dependent on a required (antecedent) history of liberalization.¹⁶ In other words, it is part of the philosophical structure of Rawls's political philosophy, as it is for Hegel's, that it offers a retrospective or backward-looking liberalism rather than a forward-looking liberalism (as were the liberalisms of Spinoza, Locke, Montesquieu, and so on).

¹⁴ Cf. PL, p. 151: "equal liberty of conscience ... takes the truths of religion off the political agenda."

¹⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, On the Social Contract, ed. R.D. Masters, trans. J.R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), pp. 131-132: "whoever dares to say there is no salvation outside of the church should be chased out of the State" (Book 4, chap. 8). There is a brief commentary on this passage from Rousseau's civil religion chapter in Rawls, A Theory of Justice, pp. 215-216; but Rawls's focus in this discussion is on Rousseau's own intolerance -- criticizing Rousseau for denying toleration to Catholics. One can also attempt to interpret Rawls's key idea of "overlapping consensus" in relation to Rousseau's formulation of the general will in Book 2, chap. 3: "take away from [private wills] the pluses and minuses that cancel each other out, and the remaining sum of the differences is the general will" (On the Social Contract, ed. Masters, p. 61). This juxtaposition of Rousseau and Rawls suggests the interesting thought that in both cases, political consensus is arrived at less by founding it on something positive than by politically subtracting commitments that will set citizens apart from one another. More generally, see the interesting suggestion by Brian Barry about Rawls as standing within a Rousseauian tradition of reflection on social order: Barry, "John Rawls and the Search for Stability," Ethics, Vol. 105 (July 1995), p. 880.

¹⁶ Cf. "Commonweal Interview with John Rawls," in Rawls, Collected Papers, ed. Freeman, p. 621: "I give a historical answer, I don't give a theoretical answer." This helps explain why Richard Rorty aligns Rawls with Hegel and Dewey rather than with Kant: see "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," in Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth [Philosophical Papers, Volume 1] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 180-181, 184-185. There are also suggestive remarks about Hegelian aspects of Rawls's enterprise in Duncan Ivison, Postcolonial Liberalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 7-8.

But then one can ask: What does such an “owl of Minerva” philosophy add to what history has already accomplished? One could say it’s not trying to do anything: it merely acknowledges the history of liberalization that has already been unfolded. Presented with religions that have not participated in this history of liberalization, it cannot supply “true” arguments or “normative foundations” that will encourage them to liberalize. It can merely remind them genealogically of the story that the history of illiberal religions already teaches: that unreasonable religions shed rivers of blood to no purpose whereas reasonable religions reap the benefits of ecumenical citizenship.

Having said all this, it still must be conceded that it is far from obvious why the Wars of Religion are directly relevant to the concerns of contemporary liberals. Rawls himself acknowledges this in a few places. Right after he completes his presentation of the genealogy in the Introduction to PL, he writes:

“It may seem that my emphasis on the Reformation and the long controversy about toleration as the origin of liberalism is dated in terms of the problems of contemporary political life. Among our most basic problems are those of race, ethnicity, and gender [whereas those of religion have been largely solved, he seems to be saying – R.B.].” (PL, p. xxx)

And in a discussion of J.S. Mill in relation to Locke’s doctrine of toleration, in his Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy, Rawls writes:

“During the wars of religion it was taken for granted that the content of belief was above all important. One must believe the truth, the true doctrine, otherwise one put one’s salvation in jeopardy. Religious error was feared as a terrible thing; and those who spread error aroused dread. By Mill’s time, however, the view of the question has obviously changed. The struggle over the principle of toleration has long since been settled.”¹⁷

If Rawls thinks the problem of toleration “has long since been settled,”¹⁸ why does he make a point of re-activating it by putting the Wars of Religion back on the liberal agenda?

It isn’t obvious that the Wars of Religion are relevant to the problem of how to theorize contemporary liberalism. On the other hand, neither is it obvious that the Wars of Religion aren’t still relevant (or becoming relevant once again). Consider what Mark Lilla writes in a recent book:

“For over two centuries, from the American and French revolutions to the collapse of Soviet Communism, political life in the West revolved around eminently political questions. We argued about war and revolution, class and

¹⁷ Rawls, Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy, p. 309. Interestingly, Steven B. Smith, in a review of this book, criticizes Rawls for failing to incorporate what he knows about the 16th/17th-century context in his readings of canonical liberal thinkers: see Smith, “The Philosopher of Our Times,” The New York Sun, May 11, 2007 [<http://www.nysun.com/article/54265>, p. 3].

¹⁸ Also, when Rawls writes that “equal liberty of conscience ... takes religious truths off the political agenda” (PL, p. 151), one could interpret this as the summary of an historical accomplishment: since the 17th-century fight for liberty of conscience was successful, religious truths have been taken off the political agenda.

social justice, race and national identity. Today we have progressed to the point where we are again fighting the battles of the sixteenth century – over revelation and reason, dogmatic purity and toleration, inspiration and consent, divine duty and common decency. We are disturbed and confused. We find it incomprehensible that theological ideas still inflame the minds of men, stirring up messianic passions that leave societies in ruin. We assumed that this was no longer possible, that human beings had learned to separate religious questions from political ones, that fanaticism was dead. We were wrong.”¹⁹

This may be in some respects a persuasive view of our situation as seen from a post-9/11 vantage-point. (After all, a world offering the prospect of theocratic states armed with nuclear weapons – our world! – cannot plausibly be considered to be a world safely nested in the hands of secularism.)²⁰ But it is unlikely, to say the least, that it was in this spirit that Rawls offered his narrative about the Wars of Religion. So what else presents itself as a plausible interpretation of the relevance of the 16th century for Rawls’s philosophical project?

Here we can attempt to provide several possible answers to this question at the same time as trying to reconstruct how the genealogy sets the larger agenda for PL. Our general thesis is that Rawls excavates the origins of liberalism qua reaction to the devastation wrought by the Wars of Religion because it conveys in an especially dramatic way why it is necessary for political liberalism to detach itself from any and all comprehensive views (insofar as this is possible). Put somewhat polemically, one could say that the Wars of Religion are a kind of rhetorical sledgehammer that can be brought to bear whenever citizens of a liberal polity feel tempted to make their comprehensive doctrines (especially religious comprehensive doctrines!) the topic of public exchange. What the Wars of Religion scenario highlighted in the Introduction to PL teaches us is that what it means to bring one’s comprehensive doctrine into the political domain is to aspire to impose this comprehensive doctrine by means of state power precisely in the manner of 16th-century theocracies. I would describe this as a skewing of the Rawlsian agenda, but Rawlsians will obviously see the matter quite differently.

Rawls again refers back to the Wars of Religion in his Commonweal interview, and we can see from that discussion as well that the continuing relevance of 16th-century rival theocracies (Catholic and Protestant) connects directly with Rawls’s conception of public reason vs. comprehensive views. Presented with the standard kind of objection to the core argument of PL (namely, that there is a “veiled argument for secularism” in Rawls’s appeal to public reason), Rawls responds: “How many religions are there in the

¹⁹ Mark Lilla, The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), p. 3. Lilla, in an encapsulated version of his argument (“The Politics of God,” The New York Times Magazine, August 19, 2007, p. 30), rightly highlights Iranian President Ahmadinejad’s Open Letter to George W. Bush (May 8, 2006) as a remarkable testament to the continued (or resumed) salience of theocratic politics in the contemporary world.

²⁰ “Theocracies with nuclear weapons” can come about either through Iran acquiring nuclear arms or through Pakistan becoming more of a theocratic state than it currently is under President Musharraf. Neither possibility can be ruled out.

United States? How are they going to get on together? One way, which has been the usual way historically, is to fight it out, as in France in the sixteenth century. That's a possibility. But how do you avoid that? I can't see any other solution [apart from public reason]."²¹ Again, there is an aspect of rhetorical arm-twisting here: no one ought to be unwilling to relinquish their comprehensive commitments in the political domain if failure to do so means a return to the 16th-century situation where one has to "fight it out" (by implication, the unavoidable outcome once comprehensive doctrines enter the realm of state authority).

The cure for pre-liberal Wars of Religion is to prohibit Catholics from requiring a Catholic view of life as a condition of citizenship; to prohibit Protestants from requiring a Protestant view of life as a condition of citizenship; and so on. But I think this suggested to Rawls a far-reaching theoretical predicament: if Catholics can't insist on a Catholic view of life, and Protestants can't insist on a Protestant view of life, can liberals insist on a liberal view of life? If we allow ourselves to think of liberalism as a kind of secular religion, should a "liberal theocracy," so to speak, be permitted while Catholic and Protestant theocracies are prohibited? All comprehensive doctrines, whether religious or philosophical, are in principle "sectarian" and therefore cannot be appealed to in underwriting a properly liberal regime. Hence (despite the paradox), it is illegitimate to appeal to a liberal philosophy of life in founding a liberal polity.

One can certainly see the line of thinking here, but it raises the very large question of whether one can be, for civic purposes, agnostic about the ends of life while decidedly privileging the needs of citizenship over the demands of faith (at least in cases where faith is anti-civic). In the Introduction to PL, Rawls writes: "To maintain impartiality between comprehensive doctrines, [political liberalism] does not specifically address the moral topics on which those doctrines divide" (p. xxx). He similarly writes that "a zeal for the whole truth" represents a temptation to found liberal society on a more ambitious set of philosophical ideals than is appropriate for a constitutional regime, and political liberalism succeeds in resisting this temptation (PL, pp. 42-43). But can a view of society that is robustly egalitarian, "civicist" (committed to a strong doctrine of shared citizenship), and basically secular be "impartial between comprehensive doctrines" in the way that Rawls suggests?²²

²¹ "Commonweal Interview with John Rawls," pp. 619, 620.

²² Earlier in this essay, we referred to the theme of Rawls's "civicism" – his commitment to a doctrine of strong citizenship that would actually make better sense philosophically if it were affirmed as in effect a comprehensive doctrine (see n. 3 above). In light of this robust civicism in Rawls, it is hard to comprehend why Sheldon Wolin is so bitterly critical of Rawls in the expanded edition of Politics and Vision (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004). In fact, Rawls's idea that members of a liberal society should embrace a "political conception of themselves" that defines a more encompassing citizen-identity – that is, more encompassing than their non-public identities – ought to be very appealing to Wolin. Interpreted according to its most attractive aspect (from my point of view and also that of early Wolin), the fundamental meaning of Rawlsian public reason is that, civically speaking, citizens (and even more so, judges and public officials) are in some ultimate sense obliged to address fellow-citizens on a basis of citizen-to-citizen and not sectarian-to-fellow-sectarian or sectarian-to-possible-convert. Part of what

Why is Rawls so averse to casting his liberalism as founded upon a comprehensive view? In many ways, doing so would render his philosophical enterprise a much simpler one. Not least, it would absolve him of charges by his critics (which are not unreasonable) that he is hiding his more robust philosophical commitments behind a façade of neutrality.²³ It's as if Rawls has somehow convinced himself that anyone committed to a comprehensive doctrine – including those committed to comprehensive versions of liberalism – latently harbours the ambition to impose this doctrine by force on all members of society. On p. 37 of PL, he writes:

“a continuing shared understanding on one comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine can be maintained only by the oppressive use of state power. If we think of political society as a community united in affirming one and the same comprehensive doctrine, then the oppressive use of state power is necessary for political community.... the Inquisition was not an accident; its suppression of heresy was needed to preserve that shared religious belief. The same holds, I believe, for any reasonable comprehensive philosophical and moral doctrine, whether religious or nonreligious. A society united on a reasonable form

this entails is that all citizens qua citizens have a civic identity that, within the specifically political realm, takes priority over their other non-political identities. This is precisely the set of ideas that seem quite close to Wolin's own conception, at least in the original edition of Politics and Vision.

It's true that I too am fairly critical of Rawls in this essay. Just to make my own position clear: I think there are sound and unsound aspects of the doctrine of public reason. The idea of giving special weight to the civic exertion by which one assumes the identity of a citizen among citizens seems perfectly sound (and again, it's puzzling that Wolin didn't find this aspect of Rawls more appealing). But where the Rawlsian conception of public reason goes badly off the rails is in its implausible suggestion that conceptions of what is valuable in life should be excluded from legitimate public discourse in the interests of maximizing shared ground among citizens. (Cf. “Commonweal Interview with John Rawls,” p. 622: “this form of regime ... has its own public form of discourse.” On p. 242 of PL, Rawls speaks of “the duty to adopt a certain form of public discourse.” He concedes that excluding comprehensive doctrines may lend a certain “shallowness” to the tenor of public discourse, but he nonetheless insists that this shallowness is an acceptable price to pay in order to be faithful to “our duty of civility to other citizens.” Also, see the important formulation on p. 152: “by avoiding comprehensive doctrines we try to bypass religion and philosophy's profoundest controversies so as to have some hope of uncovering a basis of a stable overlapping consensus.”) I grant that assuming a strong civic identity must emphasize what citizens share; but why must we be that focused on what we share? (Again, it seems an over-reaction to the Rawls-constructed Wars of Religion scenario.)

²³ Cf. George Klosko's chapter in this volume: “in the guise of protecting citizens from one another's comprehensive views, neutralists use their position to insure that their own views win” [manuscript, p. 9]; Klosko is presenting the views of Michael McConnell, but Klosko clearly is persuaded that this critique has quite a lot of force. Needless to say, similar challenges are mounted by a hefty battalion of critics of Rawls.

of utilitarianism, or on the reasonable liberalism of Kant or Mill, would likewise require the sanctions of state power to remain so.”

And in an accompanying note (pp. 37-38, n. 39), Rawls acknowledges that all of this (that is, the notion of Kantian or Millian tyranny) seems paradoxical; yet he again reasserts that the idea of a whole society joined in one particular philosophy, including a liberal philosophy, requires the coercive imposition of that philosophy upon the whole society (with Kantian or Millian Inquisitors, etc.), in principle no different from the political enforcement of medieval Catholicism. Again, it’s as if what it meant to hold a comprehensive doctrine, whether a religion or a philosophy, was to aspire to coerce the whole society to accept that doctrine – to impose the true philosophy by means of “autocratic use of state power” (PL, p. 304). The thought experiment being laid out here is indeed a very strange one. Those engaged in the enterprise of philosophy are typically committed to reflection on the plane of comprehensive doctrines (i.e., as a purely intellectual activity) without any desire (latent or expressed) to see those doctrines enforced politically. Leaving aside Plato’s image of philosopher-kings, why would one even conceive the notion of philosophies like those of Kant or Mill being coercively imposed as state religions on whole societies?

There is a related text in PL, pp. 134-135: Rawls states that he is providing an alternative to “the dominant tradition,” from Plato and Aristotle all the way up to Sidgwick and (in our day) Raz and Dworkin, which sought to identify the one true conception of the good. The intellectual breakthrough associated with political liberalism consists in realizing that “the question the dominant tradition has tried to answer has no answer: no comprehensive doctrine is appropriate as a political conception for a constitutional regime” (p. 135). Again, this suggests that what the dominant tradition was aiming at was provision of an official theology for a state-imposed orthodoxy. Why can’t one be animated by “a zeal for the whole truth” (pp. 42-43) without at the same time being driven by a zeal for political enforcement of this truth?

It is important to add that one can also raise problems with Rawls’s comprehensive doctrine/political doctrine distinction that have nothing to do with religion. Suppose one is a Marxist, say, or an environmentalist. Can one separate these political commitments from grander views of the ends of life? The issue is not whether these “sectarian” views should be allowed to impose their philosophy on the whole society (on the model of theocracy), but whether these views can even be given a legitimate hearing in ways that express their intended scope. What we wind up with, it seems, is a general contraction or flattening of the domain of political reflection and debate.²⁴ If most non-liberal political views – not just those held by religionists – engage grander views of what is at stake in politics, the only citizens who will not have their political commitments de-legitimized will be Rawlsian political liberals. And in fact the

²⁴ Dombrowski, Rawls and Religion, p. 116: Rawlsians ought to make clear why we need “the lingua franca provided by public reason” by pointing out “the disrespect involved in politics if one speaks to others strictly in the terms idiosyncratic to one’s own comprehensive doctrine.” Does a Green Party activist show disrespect for fellow-citizens by trying to expand the existing terms of political discussion by means of a far-reaching engagement with alternative philosophies of life? Do we risk Wars of Religion by allowing politics to be a mutual contest of such philosophies?

same challenge applies in the case of liberals (like Christopher Hitchens) who are committed to challenging religionists (in politically-charged ways) that Rawlsian strictures would not permit. Daniel Dombrowski is concerned to respond to worries on the part of Rawls's critics that "Rawls's strategy of avoidance robs political philosophy of its excitement and importance."²⁵ Well, the more serious worry is that this theoretical strategy will rob politics of its excitement and importance. Rawls's "reasonable pluralism" is an attempt to pacify pluralism on the assumption that an unpacified pluralism, expressed politically, will all too easily lead to the resumption of a 16th-century-style politics of the sword (20th-century equivalent: Lebanon; 21st-century equivalent: Iraq).

The incoherence in Rawls's doctrine of public reason seems to flow from trying to be inclusive and exclusionary at the same time: it's a big tent that welcomes all "reasonable" comprehensive doctrines, but must bar those that are unreasonable. But if the boundary between reasonable and unreasonable is defined by whether one wishes to bring a not-yet-shared set of comprehensive commitments to bear on political life, it's hard to see how this won't entail an illiberal contraction of the scope of political deliberation by pre-defining many political possibilities as unreasonable before they've even been given a chance to make their case. If (again) Marxists had to adhere to the same strictures applied to fundamentalist Christians, they would be barred from making the political arguments they make on the basis of the philosophic commitments that define them as Marxists. Being required to cast their views only in terms that would be antecedently accessible to all citizens, Marxism would thereby be banished as a political possibility; it could survive only as a form of private faith. The paradox is that while Rawls's political liberalism set out to avoid coercing people into a liberal philosophy of life, exclusion by normative fiat of those outside the liberal mainstream is precisely what is achieved with respect to existential commitments that straddle politics and worldview.²⁶

Political liberalism doesn't exist – it's a phantom of the Rawlsian imagination. A liberal regime always reflects and embodies a liberal view of life, even if it isn't cashed out in terms of Kantian or Millian autonomy. If liberals prize ecumenical citizenship above commitment to some more parochial but more over-arching vision of things, that is itself a liberal view of life. The more Rawls emphasizes the need to subordinate comprehensive doctrines to the needs of what one can call "pan-civic citizenship," the more he asserts, willy-nilly, his own (fairly attractive) comprehensive doctrine – which ought to be defended as such. Calling this "political liberalism" merely obscures what should instead be acknowledged as a foundationalist principle.²⁷

²⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

²⁶ Cf. Stanley Fish's typically spirited argument along similar lines in "Mutual Respect as a Device of Exclusion," in Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement, ed. Stephen Macedo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 88-102. Fish's target is Gutmann and Thompson, but his challenges also apply well enough to Rawls.

²⁷ Political liberalism, with its idea of "apply[ing] the principle of toleration to philosophy itself," of keeping liberalism philosophically shallow, and so on (PL, pp. 10, 152, 154, 242) – i.e., basing politics on notions that are supposed to be in some sense

There remains one other way of interpreting why Rawls goes out of his way to highlight the continuing relevance of the Wars of Religion. As is intimated in Rawls's nod to Judith Shklar in the Introduction to PL (p. xxvi, n. 10), Rawls agrees with many liberals in thinking that the compellingness of liberalism is best founded, not as the articulation of a positive philosophy of life, but rather as the imperative to avoid a "summum malum" (that is: on this view, the most compelling reasons for being a liberal are negative, not positive). And the Wars of Religion serve supremely well (as they did for Hobbes!) as the concretization of the summum malum. This relates back to Rawls's fundamental strategy of steering clear of liberalism as a comprehensive doctrine, and raises anew the question of whether this is the best strategy for grounding liberalism in the face of challenges from non-liberal comprehensive doctrines.

It seems to me that there is still an easy challenge to Rawls's foundational distinction between comprehensive doctrines and a political doctrine that is virtually impossible to banish. Why should devotees of an "unreasonable" comprehensive doctrine allow a need for common citizenship to trump this all-encompassing commitment (which is precisely what the adjective "comprehensive" is meant to conjure up)?²⁸ If the answer is that we are obliged to be fair to co-citizens who hold divergent commitments, we can again ask why this sense of fairness should have trumping power over an all-encompassing interpretation of what gives purpose to life. In other words, why would an adherent of a non-liberal comprehensive doctrine defer to an understanding of shared citizenship that did not even claim for itself the moral and philosophical authority of a comprehensive doctrine?²⁹ It is as if Rawls, in conceiving the idea of a political doctrine that is not a comprehensive doctrine, puts a self-willed moral-philosophical vacuum at the centre of his philosophy of citizenship. Why should that be thought to be a practical-political advantage? These questions of "why should citizenship trump X?"³⁰ therefore

philosophically uncontroversial, as if such a thing were possible – is merely a more radical version of the neutralism asserted by Rawls in A Theory of Justice with his doctrine of "the priority of the right to the good." (Conceptions of the good, in both cases, refer to that sphere of religious and philosophical controversy above which Rawlsian liberalism seeks to elevate itself.) The neutralism advanced by early Rawls was not philosophically plausible, and the neutralism advanced by late Rawls is no more plausible.

²⁸ Cf. Collected Papers, ed. Freeman, p. 617: "A comprehensive doctrine, either religious or secular, aspires to cover all of life.... It aims to cover everything."

²⁹ To be sure, one can say "Forget about those committed to anti-civic comprehensive doctrines; rather, put your civic energy into cultivating citizenship with those capable of citizenship." Still, it doesn't seem very satisfying theoretically to abstain from giving a comprehensive account of citizenship as a human good if one might have, on a different understanding of liberalism, given such an account.

³⁰ When one thinks about the possible contents of this "X," Rawls's assimilation of religions and philosophies as comprehensive doctrines starts to look much less persuasive. For a utilitarian or a Kantian to subordinate their philosophies of life to imperatives of shared citizenship doesn't appear very difficult. For the member of an

lead us towards the idea that only citizenship formulated as itself a comprehensive doctrine can answer these challenges. If being a citizen among citizens is an important part of living a full, flourishing life, then we can begin to respond to questions about why merely political commitments can trump (what are by definition more metaphysically and more existentially ambitious) comprehensive commitments.³¹ But moving in this direction would require Rawls not only to drop his political/comprehensive distinction, but also to embrace liberal perfectionism – and therewith, Rawlsian liberalism, admitting that its core conceptions fail to achieve their purpose, would be forced back to the drawing-board. Acknowledging that commitment to citizenship stands within the sphere of reflection on the ends of life will not turn liberalism into a form of secular theocracy.

Amish community or for an Islamist to do so is an entirely different proposition. Non-liberal religions pose challenges to Rawls's philosophy of citizenship that philosophical comprehensive doctrines don't.

³¹ A similar challenge is put to Rawls (drawing on Rawls's own acknowledgment of the problem) in William A. Galston's chapter in this book: [manuscript, p. 15, n. 19]. Cf. "Civic Resources in a Liberal Society: 'Thick' and 'Thin' Versions of Liberalism," in Ronald Beiner, Liberalism, Nationalism, Citizenship: Essays on the Problem of Political Community (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), pp. 58-59. My argument in that essay is that Stephen Macedo is able to formulate a more robustly civicist version of liberalism than Rawls's because, although Macedo interprets himself to be faithful to Rawlsian political liberalism, he doesn't allow himself to be hobbled by Rawls's doctrinal distinctions to the extent that Rawls himself is.