INTRODUCING JOHN RAWLS' CONCEPT OF PUBLIC REASON

In his article, *The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*, John Rawls describes the ideal relationship that should exist between a political liberal society and the many religions and secular groups that thrive within it. The problem, as stated by Rawls, is that the conflicting comprehensive doctrines of the existing religious and non-religious sectors (which he supposed most are unreasonable) within a democratic society pose a potential or actual threat to its political stability.

Rawls’ assumption is that, while the different comprehensive doctrines may not agree with each other and may not be necessarily compatible with the liberal political conception, yet, at least, they have common notion of ‘public reason’ and may endorse a constitutional democratic society and recognize its public reason. Basically, this position assumes that there are unreasonable doctrines that are incompatible with a democratic society. However, they should not necessarily go against or stand in the way of public reason. Public reason necessitates that comprehensive doctrines must be reasonable and to be reasonable, comprehensive doctrines do not reject the essentials of a constitutional democratic polity.

For citizens (religious and non-religious) to have an access to public reason, John Rawls proposes that their different comprehensive doctrines must be replaced by an idea that which is politically reasonable. He says that they need to consider what kinds of reasons they may reasonably give one another. He
proposes this for the mere fact that these citizens cannot reach agreement or even approach mutual understanding on the basis of their irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines. The basic requirement is that a reasonable doctrine accepts a constitutional regime and its companion idea of legitimate law.\(^1\) Public reason, as described by John Rawls, necessitates a discussion or deliberation of what is reasonable done in public but the discourse used by those who participate is that which can be understood and accepted by all.

The idea of public reason, according to Rawls, specifies at the deepest level the basic moral and political values that are to determine a constitutional democratic government’s relation to its citizens and their relation to one another.\(^2\) As for the content of public reason, Rawls says that a citizen engages in public reason when he or she deliberates within a framework of what he or she sincerely regards as the most reasonable political conception of justice, a conception that expresses political values that others might also reasonably be expected to endorse.\(^3\) He further adds that the content of public reason is given by the principles and values of the family of liberal political conceptions of justice. Thus, to engage in public reason is to appeal to one of these political conceptions when debating fundamental political questions. Rawls believes that this requirement still allows different religious traditions to introduce into political discussions at any time their comprehensive doctrines, religious or nonreligious, provided that they give properly public reasons to support the principles and policies their comprehensive doctrine is said to support.\(^4\)

Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick summarize John Rawls’ idea:

“In the concept of the ‘overlapping consensus’ (Rawls, 1987), Rawls tries to account for the pluralism of contemporary liberal societies. Members of society will be committed to ‘comprehensive doctrines’ that play a large role in constituting their self-understanding and sense of identity. In a just pluralist society, individuals will recognize that not everyone can be convinced of the truth of their own doctrine. They must accept a degree of ‘reasonable disagreement,’ so that their differences with others are never resolved. They must be tolerant of other comprehensive doctrines. Thus, in a just society, all ‘reasonable comprehensive doctrines’ will have no common overlapping ground of mutual toleration and commitment to the liberal principles. In effect, the citizen separates the complex self that is constituted through their comprehensive doctrines, from their participation as a political being in social structures that are shared with others, who come from often radically divergent communities.’\(^5\)

An Appraisal of John Rawls’ Concept of Public Reason

Quite obviously, John Rawls’ concept of public reason has some questionable and debatable points. His bias is towards the state and his main concern is on how a democratic state could survive in a religiously pluralistic society. As such, religious truth claims are being subjugated under the pretext of public reason in order to protect the interest of the state. Roger Trigg writes that clearly Rawls places much stress on the notion of the “reasonable,” which he distinguishes sharply from that of truth. He further observes that Rawls’ concept of public reason that limits the “reasonable” within the confines of the political undermines and negates reasonability within the realms of the religious.\(^6\)

Moreover, in Trigg’s analysis, Rawls slides so easily from noting the fact of disagreement to asserting the absence of a ‘public basis of establishing the truth of religious beliefs.’

---


\(^2\) Rawls, *Collected Papers*, Section 1.1.

\(^3\) Rawls, *Collected Papers*, Section 2.1


Trigg believes that Rawls’s idea of a public basis is firmly rooted in what can as a matter of fact be publicly accepted. Trigg interprets it as sociological and not an epistemological concept. He adds that Rawls refers to ‘publicly shared methods of inquiry and forms of reasoning,’ as, ‘those methods to be familiar from common sense and to include the procedures and conclusions of science and social thought, when these are well-established and not controversial.’

Trigg understands that these general beliefs, that Rawls thinks, reflect ‘the current public views in a well-ordered society.’ Trigg sees that this notion of ‘well-ordered’ society is itself a technical term for Rawls, delineating an ideal of affairs. As Trigg understands it, Rawls describes a society in which ‘the publicly recognized conception of justice establishes a shared point of view from which citizens’ claims on society can be adjudicated.’

Trigg evaluates that in public reason “Everything in fact depends on citizens being reasonable enough to put aside their particular beliefs in order to come to procedural agreements, with those they differ, about what could count as a public justification.”

Trigg adds that Rawls believes that because of the great divergences in society, it ought to be recognized that the exercise of reason, combined with freedom, will never produce a consensus. He insists that there are those who yearn for a settled society where people agree on fundamentals, and there are those who welcome the fact of diversity and difference. Yet, the problem remains how an encouragement of diversity can be properly reconciled with a passion for truth. Trigg points out that Rawls tries to meet this kind of problem with his distinction between the reasonable and the rational. He opines that for Rawls the idea of reasonable is clearly linked with that of fair, social cooperation while rational agents pursue their ends both individually and collectively without due regard to the projects of those with who they disagree.

In a place called ‘public world,’ particular controversial doctrines have no place, thus Rawls says that ‘one must distinguish between a public basis of justification generally acceptable to citizens on fundamental political questions and the many non-public bases of justification belonging to the many comprehensive doctrines and acceptable only to those who affirm them.’

Using Rawls explanation of what is reasonable and rational, it is, thus, obviously insinuating that, as Trigg understands, religion is an excellent example of a so-called ‘rational’ comprehensive doctrine that should not be allowed into the public arena. Because of its essentially controversial nature, religion is then to be excluded from the public sphere. Trigg suggests that toleration should allow citizens to pursue any or no religion, but not to impose it on others or expect recognition in the public sphere. According to Trigg, Rawls was more concerned about insoluble controversy than religion as such. With the notion of public reason, many religious believers will be excluded from public debate as their beliefs are ruled in private matter. Trigg adds that the exclusion of religious grounds will only leave religious believers disgruntled and feeling that their voice has not been heard. They have not even been overruled. They have not been listened to.

Trigg also argues that Rawls attempt to separate politics from metaphysics can seem very artificial when one approaches actual disputes. He comments that with it people could then agree to cooperate in the public

---

1Rawls, Political Liberalism, p.67
2Rawls, p.35
3Trigg, Rationality and Religion., p. 11.
4Trigg, Rationality and Religion, p. 12
5Trigg, Rationality and Religion, p. 12.
6Rawls, p.51
7Rawls, Political Liberalism, p.67
8Rawls, p.35
9Trigg, Rationality and Religion., p. 11.
10Trigg, Rationality and Religion, p. 12
12Rawls, p.51
13Rawls, p.xix
14Trigg, Rationality and Religion, p.16
arena without settling basic issues of truth. They could concentrate on procedure and not on substance. Trigg writes:

“The notion of rationality has been privatized and turned over if not to the individual, then at least to different associations. It is sundered from the public world and hence by implication from the world which is objectively real, independent of human judgments. There can be no thought of such an objective state of affairs to which we all in principle have equal access from our different vantage points. In the absence of any rational means of arriving at truth that can be accepted universally, we have just to find some way to enabling people to live together even when they cannot agree.”

In Trigg’s view, equating the truth with public reason is not so much of dealing knotty political problems but rather a philosophical move which implicitly takes away the right of any religion to claim truth for itself. Moreover, associating objectivity with the public world may at first appear sensible; however, the public world is the world of people and of their judgments. What is acceptable is what is not controversial. What is publicly established depends on the mood and preconceptions of the so-called ‘public’ at a given time and place. Trigg also points out the danger that in this process, religious claims maybe subjugated or subverted by the fashion of the time. The place of religion in society then becomes questionable, not because of its failure to meet certain standards of justification, but because it runs foul of current prejudices. For Trigg, the idea of public justification is itself far from clear cut. There will be arguments about what counts as a justification, and similar differences about what counts as an adequate public justification. John Rawls does not explain in details the processes involved in coming up with what he calls public reason; amidst competing claims and justification among different religious traditions, how public reason is decided appears uncertain. Trigg comments that:

“There is in the end no way of avoiding the complicated and messy arguments both about what constitutes truth and about which views are true. It might be politically convenient to come to some kind of social arrangement which ensures that we can live together without having any arguments about the things that matter. In the end, however, that is an illusion. Religion’s place in the society depends on assessments of its truth. It may be tempting to imagine that we can have a sanitized form of reason for the public world while still making rational judgments within the cocoons of our private lives. Objective truth and the public world cannot finally part company. If we want to claim truth for our beliefs, they must be able to pass scrutiny on the public stage. If religion cannot claim truth, it can have no genuine public role to play.”

Here, it is clear that theoretically, John Rawls’ idea of public reason presents some ambiguous and problematic issues especially on the issue of religious freedom and how the different religious traditions are supposed to maintain their sacred beliefs while at the same time promote the political, social and economic interest of the state. John Rawls have not succeeded in explaining the intricacies involved in this kind of state - religion relationship in the context of a democratic society. Indeed, equating “reasonable” and generally “acceptable” with that which is primarily public and political will undermine the significant role that religion can play in the society. As it appears, John Rawls’ idea of public reason is mainly designed for the protection of the state at the expense of religion.

Let me now proceed to verify John Rawls’ idea of public reason in two concrete and practical situations that are quite prevalent.

---

15Trigg, Rationality and Religion, p.18
16Trigg, p.19
17Trigg, Rationality and Religion, p.23
18Trigg, Rationality and Religion, p.24
19Trigg, Rationality and Religion, p. 27
Religious freedom in a Democratic, R. Vibekehh N. Demaisip Bat-og

in a democratic society. Here, I would like to analyze how John Rawls’ concept of public reason works in two areas, namely: Separation of Church and State; and Freedom of Assembly which are considered inalienable religious rights inherent in a democratic and liberal society.

**Separation of the Church and the State**

Basically, in a democratic society, the State plays a minute but significant role in regulating and controlling religious activities, behavior and morality. This is due to the guiding principle of “separation of the Church and the State” that directs the operations of both bodies. Meaning, the Church can operate, manage and control its activities without intervention from the State. The State cannot dip its hand on how the Church is running its affair, in the same manner that the Church cannot intervene in how the State is running its affair.

This is expressed in essence in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which was in a great measure influenced by Protestant churches. Their view of soul freedom and separation of the church and state is seen in their earliest known confessions of faith, and their practice as a denomination has never parted company with their doctrine. There has never been a time in their history, so far, as that history is known to us, where as a corporate people they wavered in their doctrine of Free Church in a free state. Even those who, through their misguided zeal for a particular cause, have placed this principle in jeopardy hold tenaciously to this principle.20

The portion of the First Amendment reads, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” One thing is quite clear. This amendment prohibits an established church in the United States. No religious group is to be designated as the state church, such as the Anglicans in England and the Presbyterians in Scotland. This amendment also forbids laws that prohibit the free exercise of religion, whether it be Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Animism, or whatever. No person can be forced by law to espouse any religion or to profess faith in deity. This amendment recognizes the competency of the soul in religion, the right of direct access to God, and the freedom of choice with respect to religion. Here, “it is an accepted axiom by all Americans that the civil power ought to be not only neutral and impartial as between entirely different forms of faith, but ought to leave these matters on one side, regarding them no more than they regard the artistic or literary pursuits of its citizens.” 21

In short, the entire contents of the axiom are summed up in the statement that the state has no ecclesiastical function and the church no civic function. The First Amendment, which expresses the heart of this axiom, says that the state should not control the church and the church should not control the state. It was born out of the bitter experience of Europe where first one and then the other of these bodies sought to control or did control the other.22

However, in a democratic society, the Church and the State are pictured as the rails of a railroad track where the train travels towards its destination. Though they are separated from each other, they are fastened on unseen crossties of cooperation, complementing and supplementing each other’s initiatives in a grand road map for national progress. Such is the role of the church and the state in a democratic society. These roles, however, are not clearly defined, specified and enforced. But what is clear is that, religious interests are well protected and different religious traditions are not pressured to convert their beliefs into something publicly reasonable in order to promote the affairs and interests of the state. In this context therefore, the idea of public reason appears irrelevant and unnecessary. What I mean is that, in a democratic society

---


where separation of church and state is well entrenched and established, the notion of public reason is simply irrelevant.

There are instances and cases, however, where the Government, in spite of the absence of laws and/or rules and regulations, assert and affirm its supreme power in regulating and controlling religious activities, behavior and morality. This in a sense destroys the spirit of democracy that provides for religious freedom and individual liberty. In Indonesia, this case of the government trying to impose its power over religion to protect its political and economic interest was evident during Suharto’s New Order Government when religious movements perceived to be “threats” to the state’s political power were suppressed.

On the other hand, the presence of a dominant religion may also jeopardize democratic processes in terms of allowing minority voices to be heard in public. In this case one religion may regulate, control, and dictate government policies and activities. There is always what we call, the “tyranny of the majority” over and against the minority. Religious nationalism which tends to promote the supremacy of one religion over the others is one common problem that we can see even in so-called democratic countries like India, Indonesia and the Philippines. The idea of public reason that promotes equal access and participation by different religious groups and traditions may not work effectively in this particular context. Even in a democratic society, the possibility of either the state or religion imposing their political will over the other can not be ruled out. In this case, both the state and religion operate not in the context of public reason but on what is perceived to be “reasonable” in their own terms.

**Freedom of Assembly**

One of the basic rights provided in a democratic society is the Freedom of Assembly. That means, groups and individuals (religious, civic or secular) have the right to assemble and decide for themselves what they believe is in accordance with their beliefs and conviction concerning issues of morality and state action. In the Philippines, this was made evident during the most celebrated EDSA Revolution in 1986 when church people, together with various civic and cause-oriented groups marched along the streets calling for the end of the Marcos dictatorship.

At the height of his administration, Marcos declared Martial Law in 1972 by using fabricated evidences and faking events that threat national security. The Congress was dissolved, thus suspending democratic rule. Freedom of expression was stifled, press freedom was denied. Those who expressed dissenting opinion were placed in the stockade and jailed. Among those were the former Senators Benigno Aquino, Jovito Salonga and Heherson Alvarez, Sergio Osmeña III, and Congressman Satur Ocampo, to name a few.

For two decades, this was going on and the government was monitoring religious activities and even sermons. However, the Filipino people’s love of freedom prompted some civil society groups, including religious organizations to undertake anti-government initiatives. Rallies and demonstrations were held, which the dictator’s security forces always dispersed resulting to mass arrest and death of several brilliant opposition leaders. However, the church called on the faithful to support the cause of restoring democracy by forming people barricades around the camp to prevent the dictator’s forces from making an attack and finally, after a long stand off, the Marcos regime had collapsed.

The above incident is just one of the many cases where religious freedom turned the tide against government power of regulating and controlling religious activities. But the point is, in this particular context, religion takes upon itself the crucial decision of turning against a corrupt and autocratic regime based on what it perceived to be “just” and “reasonable.” What is reasonable in this case is not dictated by so-called “public reason” but primarily by certain religious belief and conviction. Thus,
in this case, Trigg’s argument against Rawls’ confinement of “reasonable” to public reason makes a lot of sense. Here, we see that religious comprehensive doctrines can in many ways be reasonable and vital for significant societal change.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown the problems and inadequacies of John Rawls’ idea of public reason not only in the theoretical sense but also in practical and concrete situations obtaining in a democratic society. Here, we see that even if the problem of religious diversity is “solved” in political theory, as John Rawls suggests, it has hardly been resolved in actual political and civic practice. Religious diversity remains a problem for both political practice and religious thought.

Who needs reason when faced with actual dispute as Trigg asks? Who pauses and thinks of “reasonable” in times of political and religious turmoil or upheavals? The idea of reasonability can be so subjective and can hardly be thought of objectively either from the political or religious perspective. What is reasonable therefore should not be confined within the limits of either the political or the religious, but must be viewed in a more comprehensive manner. Both the state and religion should find better ways of relating to each other in a more effective way, not trying to compete and outdo one another but to collaborate for the well-being of the people and society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


