



Dirk-Martin Grube
UTRECHT UNIVERSITY, THE
NETHERLANDS

Religion and Politics: Philosophical Implications of 9/11

An Introduction

Abstract

In my introduction, I situate the issue under discussion in a broad context, comparing its treatment in Europe with its treatment in the U.S. In the first part, I argue that in European Protestant Christianity, trans-individual issues, such as that of economic justice, dominate the religious agenda. In the U.S. however, issues pertaining to the individual dominate, such as abortion, gay-marriage, euthanasia etc. In the second part, I give an example of the way in which philosophy may contribute to issues of religion and politics, discussing the issue of 'theory of evolution versus Intelligent Design'. This issue does not only receive attention in the U.S. but has recently received some attention in Dutch media as well. My theses are that, first, evolution theory does not prove atheism but, rather, presupposes it; second, the real issue behind it is not only the theological question of whether or not a creator-God exists. Rather, the philosophical question to what extent a culture is prepared to accept contingency plays a pivotal role as well.

^[1] The conference that took place at Utrecht University's Theology Department at June 2nd, 2005, was titled 'Religion and Politics'. The question of the relation between religion and politics is obviously a broad one, containing many different aspects. It can take on different forms in different cultures at different times. In the Netherlands, it manifests itself currently in the discussion on the theory of evolution versus Intelligent Design. I will take up that issue below.

^[2] Another aspect of the topic that continues to receive much attention in the Western world during the last couple of years, is the issue of religious fanaticism. In the U.S., 9/11, the attacks on the World Trade Centre, stand for this issue. Its philosophical implications will be teased out in the papers that follow.¹ And in The Netherlands, the murder of Theo van Gogh comes to mind in this context. Also, the Rotterdam Imam's public condemnation of homosexuality and his warning that the Dutch society will suffocate from it deserves mention.

^[3] In this introduction, however, I will not take up the issue of religious fanaticism. Rather, I will begin by providing a broader framework within which issues of that sort can be discussed. Since both conference-papers are written from an U.S.-American viewpoint, I will sketch that framework by comparing the relation between religion and politics as it is conceived in Europe with the way it is conceived in the U.S.

1. Joseph Margolis, 'Intimations of Moral Philosophy, By Way of War and Terrorism,' *Ars Disputandi* 6 (2006), <http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000239/index.html>; Tom Rockmore, 'Before and After 9/11: Religion, Politics, and Ethics,' *Ars Disputandi* 6 (2006), <http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000240/index.html>.

^[4] In Europe, the question of the relation between religion and politics is usually specified as the question of the relation between state and church. In the history of the Western world, we see that state and church had close ties. Although the relation between state and church was at times a difficult one, European states were hardly ever completely neutral with regard to religion—think e.g. of the religious wars in the 17th century, in which e.g. the Scandinavian, i.e. Lutheran countries fought against the Catholic ones.

^[5] Currently, the situation is more complex in Europe. We are faced with a spectrum reaching from rather close alliances between state and church – some Scandinavian countries still have state churches – to a situation in which state and church are more strictly separated, prominent e.g. in France and in The Netherlands. In The Netherlands, the state *does* support religion, e.g. religious education, but supports also other, non-religious groups, such as humanists, socialists etc.

^[6] Another factor currently complicating the situation is that, in many European countries, a large and continuously growing Muslim population exists. This being the case, the question crops up as to whether the state does not have a responsibility to cater to their needs as well. This manifests itself in the debate whether or not Islamic faculties should be created or the education of Imams should somehow be integrated into existing Theology Departments.

^[7] Compared to this complex situation in Europe, the situation in the U.S. is much more straightforward—at least, theoretically: There, the state has the obligation to remain neutral with regard to religion.

^[8] I remember when I started teaching religion at a state-run university in the U.S., one of the first lessons I had to learn was that I should not confess in class to be a believer of a particular religion. Otherwise, people warned me, I might end up in court!

^[9] Historically, the neutrality in the U.S. with regard to religion was a reflex to the above-mentioned Religious Wars and the perception that the close ties between state and church was one of its causes. The European migrants, many of them coming from oppressed religious minority groups, wanted to avoid the disaster that had hit central Europe in the aftermath of the Religious Wars. Therefore, they created a state which was supposed to be neutral with regard to religion.

^[10] And this neutrality of the state with regard to religion is still one of the basic principles in the U.S. *That* it is explains the fury with which many critics of Bush Jr. attack his politics. They fear that he attempts to systematically undermine the state's neutrality with regard to religion in favor of giving priority to Christianity.

^[11] What strikes European observers, however, is that, although the state is supposed to be neutral, religious issues play a vital role in politics in the U.S. This has become clear e.g. during the last election in the U.S. in which Bush managed to mobilize the religious right in a fashion almost unmatched in history and was thereby able to secure his victory. Especially in the rural U.S. states, an overwhelming majority of, above all, white male religious conservatives, and still a significant majority of white females, voted Republican.

[12] This had to do with the religious issues that were considered to be of vital importance there. The list of those issues is still worth mentioning to a European audience since it deviates from the list of moral issues that dominates the moral agenda of European Christians. If we focus on the relevant contrast group, viz. European *Protestant* Christians, we can say that, as a rule of thumb, moral issues pertaining to *trans*-individual questions dominate the agenda. But for *U.S.*-Christians, especially for the right-wing that supports Bush, moral issues pertaining to the *individual* dominate the agenda.

[13] For example, for many European Protestants questions of 'economic justice' are of crucial importance—'justice' understood European style, i.e. as 'distributive justice'. For example, it is common to play off Christian solidarity with the weak and downtrodden against capitalist principles. Other issues are questions of peace, of the environment etc.

[14] In the *U.S.*, however, those questions play hardly a role, at least, among the religious right-wing. There, moral questions pertaining to the *individual* dominate the agenda. Probably the most well-known issue is that of abortion. This issue has long been claimed by the religious right—we all know the pictures of the 'pro-life' activists blocking the entrance of clinics in which abortions are performed.

[15] A more recent issue on the religious agenda is that of gay-marriages. Being legalized in some of the more 'progressive' *U.S.*-states, religious conservatives condemn the marriage of gays and lesbians. By coupling voting on this issue with the national elections, some conservative states were capable of securing a particularly high voter turn-out—which gave Bush jr. a decisive advantage.

[16] Another issue which ranks high on the agenda of American conservative Christians is that of euthanasia. We all remember the recent case of the terminally ill woman whose life depended upon life-sustaining treatment and the protest of religious conservatives against her husband's wish to have her life ended.

[17] This case attracted world-wide media attention. In Europe, the reaction to the religious right's stance on the issue ranged from relatively modest condemnation to open abhorrence. In The Netherlands, the reaction to the religious right's stance was mostly critical but by and large still relatively modest, if I judge correctly. The public media broadcasted this case in a relatively 'objective' fashion.

[18] However, the German broadcast, public and private alike, abhorred the religious right's reaction. I remember a corpulent priest being broadcasted on the German public TV who, speaking very loudly and unsophisticatedly, compared 'murdering' this woman to the murders committed in the Concentration Camps - being corpulent, speaking loud and making unsophisticated comparisons of this sort fulfilling every Anti-American prejudice Germans have. The upshot was that almost every Christian in Germany, even the more conservatives ones, had to distance themselves from the utterances of the American conservatives.

[19] If I am not mistaken, a change can be noticed in the way in which the religious right claims this issue in the *U.S.* From the textbooks I used for my ethics-classes in the *U.S.*, I remember that there were a number of comparable

cases in which the question of the legitimacy of euthanasia cropped up, the most famous one probably being that of Karen Quinlan.² But although those cases attracted a lot of heated debate in ethical circles, I am not aware of the religious right occupying this case in the way in which it occupied the recent case, i.e. in such a public fashion.

[20] If there is indeed a change in the force with which the religious right claims cases of this sort, it could be taken to witness not only to its growing power in the U.S., last but not least in the media, but also to its attempt to expand the list of moral issues in which it wishes to involve itself.

[21] In any case, other religious issues which are politically important for the religious right in the U.S. are that of bio-engineering, the discussion on creationism versus the theory of evolution etc.

[22] For this conference, however, we did not invite scholars of religion but philosophers. That being the case, the question comes up what the philosopher's task is in this context.

[23] In my opinion, the prime task of the philosopher is not so much to utter opinions on those issues, to support or criticize certain religious moral sentiments. This can be an *implication* of what she has to say but it is not her prime task, qua being a philosopher. Rather, her prime task is to provide a framework within which the discussion can be conducted in a philosophically sound fashion. Since the discussion on those issues tends to be heated and polemical, and thus, often superficial, her task is to add 'depth' to it. She should try to 'sober up' the discussion, e.g. by pointing out new ways of perceiving it which help to break out of an argumentative deadlock, help to overcome polemical pro- and contra-discussions etc.

[24] Let me conclude by providing an example of such a philosophical approach to the issue of religion and politics. For that purpose, I choose the above mentioned discussion on the theory of evolution versus Intelligent Design as it is conducted in the Netherlands.

[25] Its background is the Dutch Minister of Education suggesting that, since the theory of evolution is not watertight, it should be considered as to whether an alternative theory, viz. that of Intelligent Design, should receive a place in public teaching as well, i.e. schools. This statement triggered heavy reactions from the atheist side, finding its way into many Dutch newspapers.

[26] Nota bene: This discussion differs from the well-known discussion in the U.S. on the theory of evolution versus Creationism. Different from Creationists, Intelligent Design theorists do not propose a particular scheme of creation, say, that creation took place in six days or something of that sort. Rather, they propose the more modest claim that *some* sort of intelligence is responsible for our world.

[27] From a philosophical point of view, however, the way in which this discussion is conducted is often disappointing. To give an example: It is often conducted in a fashion as if any of those theories could *prove* the atheist or the

2. See e.g. *Ethical Issues in Death and Dying*, Tom L. Beauchamp and Seymour Perlin (eds.), Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs (NJ), 1978, especially pp. 285–298.

theist stance. People take e.g. the theory of evolution to be a proof for the non-existence of a creator³ in the same sense in which natural-scientific theories prove the non-existence of certain postulates—say, in the sense in which chemical theories pertaining to the existence of gazes prove the non-existence of phlogiston.

[28] But if we look at it more closely, this is not the case. Apart from the question whether or not theories in the natural sciences can prove anything in this sense, the theory of evolution does *not* resemble theories in the natural sciences in important respects. For example, it does not allow for predictability, let alone quantitative predictability. Rather than being capable of predicting, it explains facts *post factum*. In that respect, it resembles more the sort of explanations we come across in the field of *history* rather than a theory in the natural sciences.

[29] That being the case, the theory of evolution receives its plausibility not so much from its internal features, say, from a capability to predict adequately but, rather, from *external* factors.⁴ Quite like other theories of history, it receives its plausibility from a broader context, viz. from a certain *Weltbild*. Within certain *Weltbilder*, it makes sense, within others, it does not. Quite like certain theories of history make sense only within certain *Weltbilder*, say, a Marxist theory makes sense only within a broadly materialist *Weltbild*, the theory of evolution makes sense only within a certain *Weltbild* as well.

[30] An important feature of a *Weltbild* within which the theory of evolution can flourish is a broad-scale acceptance of *contingency*. Only within a *Weltbild* which relies heavily on contingency, i.e. within which occurrences of events are considered to be coincidental, arbitrary in a certain sense, can the theory of evolution flourish.

[31] This becomes clear when we compare the acceptance of contingency in the English-speaking intellectual climate with the acceptance of contingency in the German-speaking intellectual climate: Whereas it has been accepted in intellectual circles in the English-speaking realm since the 19th century on a broad scale, its acceptance in Germany was, and to some extent still is, much slower and proceeded more hesitantly.⁵ Think e.g. of the second half of the 19th century: While the theory of evolution flourished in the English-speaking intellectual climate at that time, it became seriously contested in the German-speaking intellectual climate. More precisely speaking, in the latter, philosophical movements emerged which made the theory of evolution explicitly or implicitly superfluous since they contested the ground upon which such theories can flourish. They contested the acceptance of contingency. I mean the re-emergence of transcendental philosoph-

3. As is the case in the common identification of 'Wissenschaftlichkeit' with the theory of evolution: The idea is that, if you are a serious scholar, you must believe in the theory of evolution, thus, reject the belief in a creator. Arguments of this sort appear regularly on TV, in The Netherlands e.g. in 'Villa Felderhof', in Germany in the 'Wissenschaftsmagazin'.

4. I do not mean to suggest that theories in the natural sciences are completely independent of external factors. Yet, if we contrast them to historical explanations, we see that they have a greater independence of external factors than historical explanations have.

5. Which is the reason why conservative religious people had to contest it much more ferociously in the English-speaking intellectual climate than in the German-speaking one. In the latter, it simply had not such a cultural dominance.

ical movements, e.g. of Marburg neo-Kantianism. They replaced the acceptance of contingency by postulating transcendental necessities, thereby destroying the ground upon which the theory of evolution can flourish.

[32] My point is not that those transcendental movements were right. Rather, my point is that their emergence shows that the theory of evolution is not a natural candidate for 'Wissenschaftlichkeit' in the sense in which it is currently portrayed in the popular discussions on the issue. Rather, it is a theory which is *heavily 'culture-laden'*. Its acceptance depends upon certain cultural parameters. It flourishes under parameters in which contingency is accepted on a broad scale and it does not flourish under parameters in which contingency is not accepted on such a broad scale.

[33] My suspicion is then that *the discussion between evolution theorists and Intelligent Design theorists is not so much on the question whether a creator-God exists or not but, rather, on the acceptance of contingency*. That is to say, both sorts of theorists do disagree in the first place not on religious issues but, rather, on patterns of thinking. Evolution theorists hold a pattern in which contingency is accepted to a greater extent and in more realms of reality than in the patterns Intelligent Design theorists presuppose. *Their difference is, above all, a philosophical one, not a religious one*. But if that is the case, then the discussion should take place first of all on philosophical grounds rather than religious ones.

[34] In any case, what the aforementioned considerations show is that the theory of evolution cannot be used as a proof for the non-existence of God. *Rather, it is more the other way round: Because belief in God has been rejected, we accept the theory of evolution*. More precisely speaking: Because we have accepted a certain Weltbild, e.g. one in which the traditional notion of God does not play a constitutive role any more and in which contingency is accepted on a broad scale, we accept the theory of evolution.

[35] From those considerations follows that we should not conduct the discussion on the theory of evolution versus Intelligent Design in isolation from the Weltbild within which these theories emerge. Rather, if we wish to have a philosophically satisfying discussion, we should conduct it in a more comprehensive manner. Only in this way can we judge the merits of e.g. the theory of evolution adequately and can we go beyond the current prejudice of considering it to be the only candidate for 'Wissenschaftlichkeit'.

[36] Part of such a more comprehensive discussion should be historico-philosophical considerations, e.g. on the success of the natural sciences in the 19th century and the widespread acceptance of contingency that goes hand in hand with it. The issues we should raise are whether the Weltbild within which the natural sciences dominate and which relies heavily on the notion of contingency is still plausible for us today—and, also, if we *wish* to embrace it.

[37] And we should also ask whether the Weltbild within which the theory of evolution flourishes is necessarily opposed to a religious one. My suspicion is that many religious people opposing the theory of evolution oppose more a certain pattern of thinking rather than its supposedly atheistic implications. That is to say, they are used to a pattern of thinking in which contingency is banned,

say, a Greek manner of thinking according to which contingency is to be avoided at all costs (remember the strong influence of Greek thinking on the formation of Christianity!). They are opposed to the idea that the explanations with the help of which we explain the existence of the universe, our ultimate destiny etc., imply accepting contingency on a broad scale.

[38] If that is true, then the question suggests itself as to whether a religion such as Christianity does not imply the acceptance of a certain *sort* of contingency by its very nature. Think of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity: If it is the case that the Second Person is identical with the First Person of the Trinity (in a sense) and the Second Person is constituted (in a sense) by a concrete historical, thus, contingent personage—does that not show that Christianity is based upon the acceptance of (a certain sort of) contingency? But if that is true, then the question crops up as to whether we should not *re-frame the discussion on Christian faith versus the theory of evolution*. We should begin asking different questions, e.g. on the sorts of contingencies implied in the theory of evolution and in Christianity. In any case, if we acknowledge that *both* the theory of evolution and Christianity are based upon the acknowledgement of contingency, then the question crops up as to whether they are not as incommensurable as commonly perceived. And if that is the case, then we should ask whether there are not ways of reconciling both with each other.

[39] I have to stop here. But I think that my point is clear by now. It is that the philosopher's prime task is to provide new frameworks for the discussion rather than to promote certain views. She should explore fresh ways to conceptualize the discussion and add *depth* to popular discussions which all too often become superficial.

[40] Both of the papers that follow below will add depth to the discussion on the issue of religion and politics. Both writers are probably familiar since both were the keynote speakers in a conference on the 'Rapprochement of the Anglo-American and the Continental philosophical Traditions' at Utrecht University.⁶ Both are also well-known from their work on theoretical issues, Joseph Margolis from, among others, his work on pragmatism, philosophy of science and art-theory, Tom Rockmore from, among others, his work on Heidegger and Hegel. Yet, both have devoted their energies to moral issues in the last years as well. Not only has Margolis published a book on 9/11⁷ but both have edited recently an anthology called 'The Philosophical Challenge of Sept. 11.'⁸ In it, the tragic occurrences are interpreted from a variety of different angles, e.g. that of political and moral reasoning and the way it has changed after Sept. 11.

6. See Joseph Margolis, 'Pragmatism's Advantage,' *Ars Disputandi* 3 (2003), [<http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000126/index.html>] and Tom Rockmore, 'Remarks on the structure of twentieth century philosophy,' *Ars Disputandi* 3 (2003), [<http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000128/index.html>].

7. Margolis, Joseph, *Moral Philosophy after 9/11*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004.

8. Tom Rockmore, Joseph Margolis and Armen T. Marsoobian, *The Philosophical Challenge of September 11th*, Malden, Mass. etc.: Blackwell, 2005.