

Introduction

ROGER TRIGG
University of Oxford

I. FAITH AND PUBLIC REASON

This collection of papers is derived from a successful Conference on 'Religion in the Public Sphere', held in Merton College, Oxford, at the end of August 2010. The conference brought together a wide variety of scholars, united in their concern for the philosophy of religion. Held under the auspices of the European Society for Philosophy of Religion, the conference was the latest of a succession of European conferences on the philosophy of religion held at different European Universities over the last thirty years or so.

One of the first was itself held in Oxford in 1978, but this was the first time the European Society has returned to that University since then. In the meantime Europe itself has changed considerably. It was difficult for academics to come from Eastern Europe in those days. One, who did manage it, told me then that his family (left in East Germany) were literally hostages, dependent on his good behaviour. At this Conference, in contrast, we were glad to welcome visitors from a much wider range of European countries than we used to, and from as far east as Russia. We even had two academics from Turkey. In all we had representatives from some twenty countries. We were helped by, and were very grateful for, a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation to enable us to award bursaries to those who would not otherwise have been able to come.

This wide geographical spread was important for the Conference as it widened our horizons beyond the presuppositions, and perhaps prejudices, of Northern Europe. This was all the more important when we were dealing with a subject with wide political ramifications. The place of religion varies very considerably in different European countries. Some have an Established Church, with some of those churches having, as in Denmark, a very close link to the apparatus of government. Others are used to a Church, often the Roman Catholic Church, having a pre-eminent place in society. Yet others, such as France, (and indeed Turkey) have a strong tradition of secularism, which restricts the place of religion in the public square. Further, in many countries, the place of religion, and the question of its official recognition, is coming under ever closer scrutiny. Major constitutional issues have been recently raised in Norway about the role of the Church of Norway in the State, and those have yet to be resolved.

The issues go far beyond the question of the recognition by a state of this or that Church. Arguments about the Lisbon Treaty of the European Union produced disagreements about whether reference should even be made in it to the Christian heritage of Europe. With significant immigration of adherents of other religions, and the general decline in Christian commitment in many European countries, it has seemed problematic to favour Christianity at all, let alone one Christian denomination. With the rise of a stress on 'human rights', it has seemed to produce an unequal treatment of citizens, if some beliefs are supported by the State and others not. Might this not appear to produce second-class citizens, whose views are not taken as seriously as those of other citizens? Why, too, should religious views be thought more important than others? A respect for the equality of all has produced a demand that the state itself should be neutral, allowing different views to flourish in a pluralist society, but not itself promoting any.

This state of affairs has in fact been underwritten, if not encouraged, by some political philosophers, notably John Rawls in the United States. He encouraged the idea of a neutral state acting as a kind of referee, holding the ring between different 'comprehensive' views about religion, and the common good. Yet the idea of an absolutely neutral state is highly questionable. No state can exist without any principles and priorities according to which it can order itself. Neutrality, too, carries with it the notion that the public square can be cleared of all religious influence. Religion, it is said, is private and personal. Individuals can pursue whatever religion they wish. That is not a public matter. Rawls' idea of what kind of reasoning could be accepted in

public has been influential. He saw himself as dealing with an essentially political situation, in which there is deep and lasting disagreement. Pluralism is not going to be eradicated, so, it seems, we must learn how to live with it and contain it. Arguments and reasoning can only be accepted in public of the kind that all 'reasonable' people can accept, without tacit appeal to principles and beliefs that are already controversial. Reasoning in public has to take into account the political fact of a divided, pluralist, society.

The *European Court of Human Rights* tends to associate democracy with pluralism. Disagreement is part and parcel of a democratic way of life, and hence pluralism must be fostered. That creates further pressure for states to be neutral on matters such as religion. Indeed a liberal political philosophy sees state neutrality as necessary for the fostering of religious freedom. Thus, assumptions grow that bundle together the ideas of democracy, pluralism and neutrality by the state to religion. We are remorselessly drawn to a secular view of the world which privatizes religion. In my own book, *Religion in Public Life: Must Faith Be Privatized?* (Oxford University Press, 2007), I have looked at how the idea of the separation of church and state has grown into that of the separation of religion from society. Religion is driven into the private recesses of the human heart. It is not acceptable as a motivating force in social life, let alone as a contributor to public, reasoned, debate. It is matter for consenting adults in private, and not fit for public discussion.

'Public reason' and 'faith' are regarded as incompatible. Disputes about religion in the public square sometimes appear to be about rather trivial concerns, such as the wearing of a cross or the setting up of an official Christmas tree in front of Government offices. At other times they centre on the question of the wearing of particular kinds of dress, such as the Islamic headscarf, or even more controversial, a full face veil. The question of the display of a crucifix in Italian schools has gone all the way to the *European Court of Human Rights*. Are non-Catholics being treated as second-class citizens, if their children are taught with what is seen as Catholic symbol prominently displayed in front of them? The place of Christianity, even in the teaching of schools, is also put in question by similar arguments. Norway has been forced by this kind of reasoning to change its school curriculum concerning the teaching of religion, following a ruling in 2007 by the *European Court of Human Rights*. Many feel that their own identity, the identity of their nation, and the even the identity of Europe as a continent steeped in a Christian heritage, is being put constantly in question. Several European countries are

aware of growing social tensions, not only between religions, but concerning the public recognition of religion.

II. ARE REASON AND RELIGION INCOMPATIBLE?

The place of religion in public life is coming to the attention of more people in more countries. It is a growing political issue. The growing influence of Islam and the spectre of *sharia* law being officially recognised frightens many, who respond not by attacking extreme elements in one religion, but by saying that public life must be cleansed of all religion, which is seen as a source of dissension and conflict, as well as paying little regard to human rights.

This last point is particularly worrying in that 'religion' is seen as intrinsically at variance with the culture of human rights. In particular, rights to equality (of women, homosexuals and so on) are seen as being trampled on by religion. Thus a democratic society may have to tolerate religion, but it must not be guided by it. This is Enlightenment doctrine, pure and simple. The forces of reason, and freedom, are arraigned against those of oppressive tradition, and arbitrary authority. The French Revolution lives on. Yet this picture takes a limited view of rationality, typically viewing it from a materialist viewpoint, and already assuming that human reason can have nothing to do with the transcendent. This is the opinion of the later Enlightenment, but was not that of the early modern period, when reason was seen as the gift of God, because we are made in His image. In fact, God was viewed as guarantor of truth, and our rationality as a reflection, albeit a pale one, of the Reason of the Creator. It was in this spirit that scientists in the age of Newton were able to enlarge empirical science in the sure knowledge that we live in an orderly, structured world reflecting the *Logos* of the Creator. They also had the assurance not only that there was an objective, regular, physical world to investigate, but also that human rationality was attuned to understand it.

This kind of reasoning not only influenced Isaac Newton and his contemporaries, but also had a direct influence on the political philosophy of the empiricist philosopher, John Locke. The latter was in many ways the intellectual inspiration behind American Independence a century later, and the drive to total religious freedom in the new United States. Yet his philosophy, although orientated to science, was deeply rooted in Christianity. He saw that we are equal, because we are equal in the sight of God, and we

are free because we are endowed by God with freedom. A coerced conversion to religion is an abuse of that freedom, and God, he thought, only values the commitment freely given of each individual. Reason, and freedom, are not the enemies of Christianity, but are underwritten and validated by it.

Faith and reason are not, on this understanding, at odds with one another. Indeed the idea that 'faith' is some magic ingredient that some people digest, and makes them impervious to reasoning, is grotesque. Only materialist prejudices from the eighteenth century assumed that 'reason' could have nothing to do with religion. If all transcendent reality is ruled out by definition, and it is assumed that the empirical world is all there is, then any claims about what lies beyond it, will by definition be irrational. 'Reason' and 'evidence' will have been tacitly defined to include only that which is within reach of scientific investigation, very often that of contemporary science, and not even science as it one day might be.

This is a view which has often surfaced in philosophy. It was exemplified by the views of the Vienna circle before the Second World War, and popularized after it in England by A.J. Ayer, the Oxford philosopher. His approach was that of verificationism, according to which not only truth, but even meaning, was dependent on our knowledge of how to check the truth and falsity of what we are talking about. On this understanding, all religious claims about God could be dismissed as meaningless. It would follow that they were not issues that could be rationally discussed in the public square. Verificationism, however, failed as a philosophy of science. Physics itself has to posit entities beyond the possibility of empirical verification, but that has not prevented the idea of science as the ultimate arbiter of truth, and possibility of meaning, reaching deep into the consciousness of many.

It is exemplified in the attacks on religion by the biologist, Richard Dawkins, who restricts the terms 'reason' and 'evidence' to what can be dealt with from a scientific perspective. He therefore achieves by definitional fiat the result that religious faith is outside the ambit of reason. Faith cannot be discussed rationally. That should mean that it cannot be criticised but that does not prevent Dawkins doing so. Strictly, however, if faith and reason are separated, faith becomes insulated from attack, and is just a subjective fact about individuals.

The attempt to eject religion and its influence from the public square is in fact a questionable tactic even for atheists. Religion should never be insulated from criticism. It makes claims about the nature of the world and the place of humans in it, and these should be examined critically, not defined

out of existence. There is a pathology of religion. Not all religion is good. (Some would say none is). Its claims, and its influence must be out in the open, and susceptible to rational examination, just as the presuppositions and prejudices of secular society must be as well. This means that religious people should be as free as anyone else to contribute to public discussion. As a matter of common sense, they may realise that appealing to authorities, such as a scripture or tradition, that not all their listeners may respect, may not be a good tactic in gaining support. That is why arguments based on alleged human benefits or harms that all can recognise, may be more persuasive. It may be good politics to try and seek common ground in order to arrive at the greatest possible agreement. That, though, is not a principled reason to drive all religious principles underground, or to suggest that all those motivated by religion somehow disqualify themselves from full participation in public life.

III. CAN THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION CONTRIBUTE?

Only three weeks after the Oxford Conference, Pope Benedict came to England and addressed an audience of politicians and others in the historic Westminster Hall in the Houses of Parliament. The Hall itself had been the scene of some important moments in the history of the Reformation in England. Those who believe that religion has no place in public life would no doubt even have questioned the Pope's right to speak there, let alone say anything of public relevance. Yet he spoke in terms which found a ready resonance with non-Catholic Christians and with those of other faiths. He spoke of the 'increasing marginalization of religion, particularly of Christianity', and referred to those who would advocate that 'the voice of religion be silenced or at least relegated to the private sphere'. Essentially he was arguing for the role of reason in faith and in public life, and suggesting that religious voices should be heard in the rational dialogue.

Such a temperate plea for rationality in public, democratic debate should be hard to resist, until one realises that, for many, religion – all religion – is the enemy of rationality. It is in the words of the American philosopher, Richard Rorty, a 'conversation-stopper'. Yet that is a caricature of true religion. If religion, any form of religion, believes it has a claim to truth, it has to recognise that its claim is not just of universal significance, but should be open to all for rational examination, and in principle able to be recognised and accepted by anyone. It should be describing a reality which we all

confront. Religion, of its nature, has to deal with a public truth, relevant to all.

As we have seen, there have been many in the history of philosophy, and today, whose idea of 'public reason', of reason which can be accepted on the public stage, is so restricted that it rules out from the start any appeal to the transcendent, or even the non-physical. For them all religious faith has to be personal and private, with, at best, a subjective validity. The nature of reality, and of truth, coupled with the concomitant issue of reason, are quintessentially philosophical questions. In the background lie issues of the rational foundation of the principles of democracy, freedom and equality, and the very foundation of human rights. In Europe, as the German philosopher and social theorist, Jurgen Habermas, has argued, these owe much to Christianity. A major problem for the twenty-first century is whether these beliefs can be given any firm basis if the heritage which produced them withers away. This is bound up with deep questions of the identity of Europe, and of the individual countries which comprise the continent.

These are live political issues across Europe. Those who, in the name of secularism, see religion as only a matter of private, idiosyncratic belief, are establishing the presumption that states must be neutral to all religion, (even neutral *against* it) and to the ethical principles which sprang from it. This, though, cuts deeper than mere political arguments, and the proponents of such views are making philosophical assumptions about the role of religion. Further, the philosophical basis of societies, the principles which underpin them, and even of democracy itself, is at stake. Philosophy has to be involved in questions about the nature of reason, Above all, the issues of the nature of faith, and its rational underpinning, has been a central concern of the philosophy of religion through the centuries. It is not surprising that that philosophers of religion see the need to look at contemporary society, and themselves enter the varied discussions about the place of religion in the public sphere. They have much to contribute.

Roger Trigg, University of Oxford

