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Philosophy and Social Hope



PENGUIN BOOKS

II. Religion As Conversation-stopper

(1994)

These days intellectuals divide up into those who think that something new and important called 'the postmodern' is happening, and those who, like Habermas, think we are (or should be) still plugging away at the familiar tasks set for us by the Enlightenment. The ones who, like me, agree with Habermas typically see the secularization of public life as the Enlightenment's central achievement, and see our job as the same as our predecessors': getting our fellow citizens to rely less on tradition, and to be more willing to experiment with new customs and institutions.

Our scepticism about the postmodern may incline us to be sceptical also about the modern, and, more specifically, about Virginia Woolf's Foucault-like claim that human nature changed around 1910. But something crucially important to the progress of secularization did happen around then. To remind ourselves of what it was, it helps to reread *In Memoriam*. One of the striking things about the poem is the poet's need, and ability, to believe in the immortality of the soul. One of the striking things about the biographies of Tennyson is the biographers' agreement that Tennyson and Hallam never went to bed together. Two young men who loved each other that much would, nowadays, be quite likely to do so. But the same religious beliefs that let Tennyson hope so fervently to see his friend in heaven also kept him out of Hallam's arms.

The big change in the outlook of the intellectuals – as opposed to a change in human nature – that happened around 1910 was that they began to be confident that human beings had only bodies, and no souls. The resulting this-worldliness made them receptive to the idea that one's sexual behaviour did not have much to do with one's moral

worth – an idea that the Enlightenment-minded author of 'Locksley Hall' still found impossible to accept. It is hard to disentangle the idea that we have an immortal soul from the belief that this soul can be stained by the commission of certain sexual acts. For sex is the first thing that comes to mind when we think about the human body as something located down there, underneath the human soul. So when we started thinking that we might have only complicated, accomplished, vulnerable bodies, and no souls, the word 'impurity' began to lose both sexual overtones and moral resonance.

For these reasons, the biggest gap between the typical intellectual and the typical nonintellectual is that the former does not use 'impurity' as a moral term, and does not find religion what James called a 'live, forced and momentous option'. She thinks of religion as, at its best, Whitehead's 'what we do with our solitude', rather than something people do together in churches. Such an intellectual is bound to be puzzled or annoyed by Stephen L. Carter's *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*. For Carter puts in question what, to atheists like me, seems the happy, Jeffersonian compromise that the Enlightenment reached with the religious. This compromise consists in privatizing religion – keeping it out of what Carter calls 'the public square', making it seem bad taste to bring religion into discussions of public policy. Whereas many religiously inclined intellectuals stick to what he calls an 'individual metaphysic', Carter, an Episcopalian, defines religion as 'a tradition of group worship'.

We atheists, doing our best to enforce Jefferson's compromise, think it bad enough that we cannot run for public office without being disingenuous about our disbelief in God; despite the compromise, no uncloseted atheist is likely to get elected anywhere in the country. We also resent the suggestion that you have to be religious to have a conscience – a suggestion implicit in the fact that only *religious* conscientious objectors to military service go unpunished. Such facts suggest to us that the claims of religion need, if anything, to be pushed back still further, and that religious believers have no business asking for more public respect than they now receive. Carter, however, thinks that privatizing religion trivializes it. He says that 'the legal culture

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that guards the public square still seems most comfortable thinking of religion as a hobby, something done in privacy, something that mature, public-spirited adults do not use as the basis for politics'.

Carter's inference from privatization to trivialization is invalid unless supplemented with the premise that the nonpolitical is always trivial. But this premise seems false. Our family or love lives are private, nonpolitical and nontrivial. The poems we atheists write, like the prayers our religious friends raise, are private, nonpolitical and nontrivial. Writing poems is, for many people, no mere hobby, even though they never show those poems to any save their intimates. The same goes for reading poems, and for lots of other private pursuits that both give meaning to individual human lives and are such that mature, public-spirited adults are quite right in not attempting to use them as a basis for politics. The search for private perfection, pursued by theists and atheists alike, is neither trivial nor, in a pluralistic democracy, relevant to public policy.

Carter criticizes

the effort by the contemporary liberal philosophers to create a conversational space in which individuals of very different viewpoints can join dialogic battle, in accord with a set of dialogic conventions that all can accept. The philosophical idea is that even though all of us have differing personal backgrounds and biases, we nevertheless share certain moral premises in common.

Carter here gives a good description both of the least common denominator of the positions of Rawls and Habermas, the two most prominent social thinkers of the present day, and of the central secularizing message of the Enlightenment. He is quite right to say that 'all these efforts to limit the conversation to premises held in common would exclude religion from the mix'. But he thinks that such exclusion is unjust.

Such exclusion, however, is at the heart of the Jeffersonian compromise, and it is hard to see what more just arrangement Carter thinks might take the place of that compromise. Contemporary liberal philosophers think that we shall not be able to keep a democratic political community going unless the religious believers remain willing to trade

privatization for a guarantee of religious liberty, and Carter gives us no reason to think they are wrong.

The main reason religion needs to be privatized is that, in political discussion with those outside the relevant religious community, it is a conversation-stopper. Carter is right when he says:

One good way to end a conversation – or to start an argument – is to tell a group of well-educated professionals that you hold a political position (preferably a controversial one, such as being against abortion or pornography) because it is required by your understanding of God's will.

Saying this is far more likely to end a conversation than to start an argument. The same goes for telling the group, 'I would never have an abortion' or, 'Reading pornography is about the only pleasure I get out of life these days.' In these examples, as in Carter's, the ensuing silence masks the group's inclination to say, 'So what? We weren't discussing your private life; we were discussing public policy. Don't bother us with matters that are not our concern.'

This would be my own inclination in such a situation. Carter clearly thinks such a reaction inappropriate, but it is hard to figure out what he thinks *would* be an appropriate response by nonreligious interlocutors to the claim that abortion is required (or forbidden) by the will of God. He does not think it good enough to say: OK, but since I don't think there is such a thing as the will of God, and since I doubt that we'll get anywhere arguing theism vs. atheism, let's see if we have some shared premises on the basis of which to continue our argument about abortion. He thinks such a reply would be condescending and trivializing. But are we atheist interlocutors supposed to try to keep the conversation going by saying, 'Gee! I'm impressed. You must have a really deep, sincere faith'? Suppose we try that. What happens then? What can *either* party do for an encore?

Carter says that he wants 'a public square that does not restrict its access to citizens willing to speak in a purely secular language, but instead is equally open to religious and nonreligious argument'. This may mean simply that he wants us atheists to stop screaming 'keep religion out of politics!' when the clergy say that abortion is against

God's will while nodding approvingly when they say that gaybashing is. If so, I entirely agree with him. The best parts of his very thoughtful, and often persuasive, book are those in which he points up the inconsistency of our behaviour, and the hypocrisy involved in saying that believers somehow have no right to base their political views on their religious faith, whereas we atheists have every right to base ours on Enlightenment philosophy. The claim that in doing so we are appealing to reason, whereas the religious are being irrational, is hokum. Carter is quite right to debunk it.

Carter is also right to say that liberal theory has not shown that 'the will of any of the brilliant philosophers of the liberal tradition, or, for that matter, the will of the Supreme Court of the United States, is more relevant to moral decisions than the will of God'. But he is wrong in suggesting that it has to show this. All liberal theory has to show is that moral decisions that are to be enforced by a pluralist and democratic state's monopoly of violence are best made by public discussion in which voices claiming to be God's, or reason's, or science's, are put on a par with everybody else's.

It is one thing to say that religious beliefs, or the lack of them, will influence political convictions. Of course they will. It is another thing to say, as Carter says, that the public square should be open to 'religious argument', or that liberalism should 'develop a politics that accepts whatever form of dialogue a member of the public offers'. What is a specifically religious 'form of dialogue', except perhaps a dialogue in which some members cite religious sources for their beliefs? What could a specifically religious argument be, except an argument whose premises are accepted by some people because they believe that these premises express the will of God? I may accept those same premises for purely secular reasons – for example, reasons having to do with maximizing human happiness. Does that make my argument a non-religious one? Even if it is exactly the argument made by my religious fellow citizen? Surely the fact that one of us gets his premises in church and the other in the library is, and should be, of no interest to our audience in the public square. The arguments that take place there, political arguments, are best thought of as neither religious nor nonreligious.

Carter frequently speaks of religion as a 'source of moral knowledge' rather than as a 'source of moral beliefs'. Of course, if we knew that religion were a source of moral knowledge, we should be foolish to shove it to the outskirts of the square. But part of the moral of Rawls's and Habermas's work – and especially of Habermas's replacement of 'subject-centred' with 'communicative' reason – is that we should be suspicious of the very idea of a 'source of moral knowledge'. It is reasonable to call a physics textbook or teacher a source of knowledge. Knowledge is justified true belief. Since physics is a relatively noncontroversial area, what such teachers and textbooks say is usually both justified and (as far as anybody now knows) true. When it comes to morals rather than science, however, every textbook, Scripture and teacher is offset by a competing textbook, Scripture or teacher. That is why, in the public square of a pluralistic democracy, justification is always up for grabs, and why the term 'source of moral knowledge' will always be out of place.

I take the point of Rawls and Habermas, as of Dewey and Peirce, to be that the epistemology suitable for such a democracy is one in which the only test of a political proposal is its ability to gain assent from people who retain radically diverse ideas about the point and meaning of human life, about the path to private perfection. The more such consensus becomes the test of a belief, the less important is the belief's source. So when Carter complains that religious citizens are forced 'to restructure their arguments in purely secular terms before they can be presented', I should reply that 'restructuring the arguments in purely secular terms' just means 'dropping reference to the source of the premises of the arguments', and that this omission seems a reasonable price to pay for religious liberty.

Carter thinks that 'contemporary liberal philosophers . . . make demands on [the religion's] moral conscience to reformulate that conscience – to destroy a vital aspect of the self – in order to gain the right to participate in the dialogue alongside other citizens'. But this requirement is no harsher, and no more a demand for self-destruction, than the requirement that we atheists, when we present our arguments, should claim no authority for our premises save the assent we hope they will gain from our audience. Carter seems to think that religious

believers' moral convictions are somehow more deeply interwoven with their self-identity than those of atheists with theirs. He seems unwilling to admit that the role of Enlightenment ideology in giving meaning to the lives of atheists is just as great as Christianity's role in giving meaning to his own life. Occasionally he suggests that we contemporary liberal ideologues suffer from the same spiritual shallowness that American law attributes to the nonreligious pacifist. Even if this were the case, however, Carter would still need to tell us why a speaker's depth of spirituality is more relevant to her participation in public debate than her hobby or her hair colour.

12. Thomas Kuhn, Rocks and the Laws of Physics

(1997)

The death in June 1996 of Thomas S. Kuhn, the most influential philosopher to write in English since the Second World War, produced many long, respectful obituaries. Most of these obituaries referred to him as a historian of science rather than as a philosopher. Kuhn would not have objected to that description, but it is a bit misleading.

If I had written an obituary, I should have made a point of calling Kuhn a great philosopher, for two reasons. First, I think that 'philosopher' is the most appropriate description for somebody who remaps culture – who suggests a new and promising way for us to think about the relation among various large areas of human activity. Kuhn's great contribution was to offer such a suggestion, one that has altered the self-images, and the rhetoric, of many different disciplines.

My second reason for calling Kuhn a great philosopher is resentment over the fact that Kuhn was constantly being treated, by my fellow professors of philosophy, as at best a second-rate citizen of the philosophical community. Sometimes he was even treated as an intruder who had no business attempting to contribute to a discipline in which he was untrained. I do not think too much should be made of the fuzzy philosopher–nonphilosopher distinction, and I should hate to try to sharpen it up. But I found it annoying that people who used 'real philosopher' as an honorific when speaking of themselves and their friends should feel entitled to withhold it from Kuhn.

Kuhn was one of my idols, because reading his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) had given me the sense of scales falling from my eyes. The fact that he came to philosophical issues sideways, so to speak – having taken a Ph.D. in physics and then becoming a self-taught